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NEW GRUB STREET

A NOVEL

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES

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NEW GRUB STREET



CHAPTER XXV

A FRUITLESS MEETING

REFUGE from despair is often found in the passion of self-pity and that spirit of obstinate resistance which it engenders. In certain natures the extreme of self-pity is intolerable, and leads to self-destruction; but there are less fortunate beings whom the vehemence of their revolt against fate strengthens to endure in suffering. These latter are rather imaginative than passionate; the stages of their woe impress them as the acts of a drama, which they cannot bring themselves to cut short, so various are the possibilities of its dark motive. The intellectual man who kills himself is most often brought to that decision by conviction of his insignificance; self-pity merges in self-scorn, and the humiliated

soul is intolerant of existence. He who survives under like conditions does so because misery magnifies him in his own estimate.

It was by force of commiserating his own lot that Edwin Reardon continued to live through the first month after his parting from Amy. Once or twice a week, sometimes early in the evening, sometimes at midnight or later, he haunted the street at Westbourne Park where his wife was dwelling, and on each occasion he returned to his garret with a fortified sense of the injustice to which he was submitted, of revolt against the circumstances which had driven him into outer darkness, of bitterness against his wife for saving her own comfort rather than share his downfall. At times he was not far from that state of sheer distraction which Mrs. Edmund Yule preferred to suppose that he had reached. An extraordinary arrogance now and then possessed him ; he stood amid his poor surroundings with the sensations of an outraged exile, and laughed aloud in furious contempt of all who censured or pitied him.

On hearing from Jasper Milvain that Amy had fallen ill, or at all events was suffering in health from what she had gone through, he felt a momentary pang which all but determined

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him to hasten to her side. The reaction was a feeling of distinct pleasure that she had her share of pain, and even a hope that her illness might become grave; he pictured himself summoned to her sick-chamber, imagined her begging his forgiveness. But it was not merely, nor in great part, a malicious satisfaction; he succeeded in believing that Amy suffered because she still had a remnant of love for him. As the days went by and he heard nothing, disappointment and resentment occupied him. At length he ceased to haunt the neighbourhood. His desires grew sullen; he became fixed in the resolve to hold entirely apart and doggedly await the issue.

At the end of each month he sent half the money he had received from Carter, simply enclosing postal orders in an envelope addressed to his wife. The first two remittances were in no way acknowledged; the third brought a short note from Amy:

‘As you continue to send these sums of money, I had perhaps better let you know that I cannot use them for any purposes of my own. Perhaps a sense of duty leads you to make this sacrifice, but I am afraid it is more likely that you wish to remind me every month that you

are undergoing privations, and to pain me in this way. What you have sent I have deposited in the Post Office Savings' Bank in Willie's name, and I shall continue to do so.—A. R.'

For a day or two Reardon persevered in an intention of not replying, but the desire to utter his turbid feelings became in the end too strong. He wrote :

'I regard it as quite natural that you should put the worst interpretation on whatever I do. As for my privations, I think very little of them ; they are a trifle in comparison with the thought that I am forsaken just because my pocket is empty. And I am far indeed from thinking that you can be pained by whatever I may undergo ; that would suppose some generosity in your nature.'

This was no sooner posted than he would gladly have recalled it. He knew that it was undignified, that it contained as many falsehoods as lines, and he was ashamed of himself for having written so. But he could not pen a letter of retractation, and there remained with him a new cause of exasperated wretchedness.

Excepting the people with whom he came in

contact at the hospital, he had no society but that of Biffen. The realist visited him once a week, and this friendship grew closer than it had been in the time of Reardon's prosperity. Biffen was a man of so much natural delicacy, that there was a pleasure in imparting to him the details of private sorrow; though profoundly sympathetic, he did his best to oppose Reardon's harsher judgments of Amy, and herein he gave his friend a satisfaction which might not be avowed.

'I really do not see,' he exclaimed, as they sat in the garret one night of midsummer, 'how your wife could have *acted* otherwise. Of course I am quite unable to judge the attitude of her mind, but I think, I can't help thinking, from what I knew of her, that there has been strictly a misunderstanding between you. It was a hard and miserable thing that she should have to leave you for a time, and you couldn't face the necessity in a just spirit. Don't you think there's some truth in this way of looking at it?'

'As a woman, it was her part to soften the hateful necessity; she made it worse.'

'I'm not sure that you don't demand too much of her. Unhappily, I know little or nothing of delicately-bred women, but I have a suspicion that one oughtn't to expect heroism in them,

any more than in the women of the lower classes. I think of women as creatures to be protected. Is a man justified in asking them to be stronger than himself?'

'Of course,' replied Reardon, 'there's no use in demanding more than a character is capable of. > But I believed her of finer stuff. My bitterness comes of the disappointment.'

'I suppose there were faults of temper on both sides, and you saw at last only each other's weaknesses.'

'I saw the truth, which had always been disguised from me.'

Biffen persisted in looking doubtful, and in secret Reardon thanked him for it.

As the realist progressed with his novel, 'Mr. Bailey, Grocer,' he read the chapters to Reardon, not only for his own satisfaction, but in great part because he hoped that this example of productivity might in the end encourage the listener to resume his own literary tasks. Reardon found much to criticise in his friend's work; it was noteworthy that he objected and condemned with much less hesitation than in his better days, for sensitive reticence is one of the virtues wont to be assailed by suffering, at all events in the weaker natures. Biffen purposely

urged these discussions as far as possible, and doubtless they benefited Reardon for the time ; but the defeated novelist could not be induced to undertake another practical illustration of his own views. Occasionally he had an impulse to plan a story, but an hour's turning it over in his mind sufficed to disgust him. His ideas seemed barren, vapid ; it would have been impossible for him to write half a dozen pages, and the mere thought of a whole book overcame him with the dread of insurmountable difficulties, immeasurable toil.

In time, however, he was able to read. He had a pleasure in contemplating the little collection of sterling books that alone remained to him from his library ; the sight of many volumes would have been a weariness, but these few—when he was again able to think of books at all—were as friendly countenances. He could not read continuously, but sometimes he opened his Shakspeare, for instance, and dreamed over a page or two. From such glimpses there remained in his head a line or a short passage, which he kept repeating to himself wherever he went ; generally some example of sweet or sonorous metre which had a soothing effect upon him.

With odd result on one occasion. He was

walking in one of the back streets of Islington, and stopped idly to gaze into the window of some small shop. Standing thus, he forgot himself, and presently recited aloud :

‘ Cæsar, ’tis his schoolmaster :
An argument that he is pluck’d, when hither
He sends so poor a pinion of his wing,
Which had superfluous kings for messengers
Not many moons gone by.’

The last two lines he uttered a second time, enjoying their magnificent sound, and then was brought back to consciousness by the loud mocking laugh of two men standing close by, who evidently looked upon him as a strayed lunatic.

He kept one suit of clothes for his hours of attendance at the hospital ; it was still decent, and with much care would remain so for a long time. That which he wore at home and in his street wanderings declared poverty at every point ; it had been discarded before he left the old abode. In his present state of mind he cared nothing how disreputable he looked to passers-by. These seedy habiliments were the token of his degradation, and at times he regarded them (happening to see himself in a shop mirror) with pleasurable contempt. The same spirit often led him for a meal to the

poorest of eating-houses, places where he rubbed elbows with ragged creatures who had somehow obtained the price of a cup of coffee and a slice of bread and butter. He liked to contrast himself with these comrades in misfortune. 'This is the rate at which the world esteems me; I am worth no better provision than this.' Or else, instead of emphasising the contrast, he defiantly took a place among the miserables of the nether world, and nursed hatred of all who were well-to-do.

One of these he desired to regard with gratitude, but found it difficult to support that feeling. Carter, the vivacious, though at first perfectly unembarrassed in his relations with the City Road clerk, gradually exhibited a change of demeanour. Reardon occasionally found the young man's eye fixed upon him with a singular expression, and the secretary's talk, though still as a rule genial, was wont to suffer curious interruptions, during which he seemed to be musing on something Reardon had said, or on some point of his behaviour. The explanation of this was that Carter had begun to think there might be a foundation for Mrs. Yule's hypothesis—that the novelist was not altogether in his sound senses. At first he scouted the idea, but

as time went on it seemed to him that Reardon's countenance certainly had a gaunt wildness which suggested disagreeable things. Especially did he remark this after his return from an August holiday in Norway. On coming for the first time to the City Road branch he sat down and began to favour Reardon with a lively description of how he had enjoyed himself abroad ; it never occurred to him that such talk was not likely to enspirit the man who had passed his August between the garret and the hospital, but he observed before long that his listener was glancing hither and thither in rather a strange way.

‘ You haven't been ill since I saw you ? ’ he inquired.

‘ Oh no ! ’

‘ But you look as if you might have been. I say, we must manage for you to have a fortnight off, you know, this month. ’

‘ I have no wish for it, ’ said Reardon. ‘ I'll imagine I have been to Norway. It has done me good to hear of your holiday. ’

‘ I'm glad of that ; but it isn't quite the same thing, you know, as having a run somewhere yourself. ’

‘ Oh, much better ! To enjoy myself may be

mere selfishness, but to enjoy another's enjoyment is the purest satisfaction, good for body and soul. I am cultivating altruism.'

'What's that?'

'A highly rarefied form of happiness. The curious thing about it is that it won't grow unless you have just twice as much faith in it as is required for assent to the Athanasian Creed.'

'Oh!'

Carter went away more than puzzled. He told his wife that evening that Reardon had been talking to him in the most extraordinary fashion, no understanding a word he said.

All this time he was on the look-out for employment that would be more suitable to his unfortunate clerk. Whether slightly demented or not, Reardon gave no sign of inability to discharge his duties; he was conscientious as ever, and might, unless he changed greatly, be relied upon in positions of more responsibility than his present one. And at length, early in October, there came to the secretary's knowledge an opportunity with which he lost no time in acquainting Reardon. The latter repaired that evening to Clipstone Street, and climbed to Biffen's chamber. He entered with a cheerful look, and exclaimed:

‘I have just invented a riddle ; see if you can guess it. Why is a London lodging-house like the human body ?’

Biffen looked with some concern at his friend, so unwonted was a sally of this kind.

‘Why is a London lodging-house——? Haven’t the least idea.’

‘Because the brains are always at the top. Not bad, I think, eh?’

‘Well, no ; it’ll pass. Distinctly professional though. The general public would fail to see the point, I’m afraid. But what has come to you?’

‘Good tidings. Carter has offered me a place which will be a decided improvement. A house found—or rooms, at all events—and salary a hundred and fifty a year.’

‘By Plutus ! That’s good hearing. Some duties attached, I suppose?’

‘I’m afraid that was inevitable, as things go. It’s the secretaryship of a home for destitute boys at Croydon. The post is far from a sine-cure, Carter assures me. There’s a great deal of purely secretarial work, and there’s a great deal of practical work, some of it rather rough, I fancy. It seems doubtful whether I am exactly the man. The present holder is a burly

fellow over six feet high, delighting in gymnastics, and rather fond of a fight now and then when opportunity offers. But he is departing at Christmas—going somewhere as a missionary ; and I can have the place if I choose.’

‘ As I suppose you do ? ’

‘ Yes. I shall try it, decidedly.’

Biffen waited a little, then asked :

‘ I suppose your wife will go with you ? ’

‘ There’s no saying.’

Reardon tried to answer indifferently, but it could be seen that he was agitated between hopes and fears.

‘ You’ll ask her, at all events ? ’

‘ Oh yes,’ was the half-absent reply.

‘ But surely there can be no doubt that she’ll come. A hundred and fifty a year, without rent to pay. Why, that’s affluence ! ’

‘ The rooms I might occupy are in the home itself. Amy won’t take very readily to a dwelling of that kind. And Croydon isn’t the most inviting locality.’

‘ Close to delightful country.’

‘ Yes, yes ; but Amy doesn’t care about that.’

‘ You misjudge her, Reardon. You are too harsh. I implore you not to lose the chance of

setting all right again ! If only you could be put into my position for a moment, and then be offered the companionship of such a wife as yours !’

Reardon listened with a face of lowering excitement.

‘I should be perfectly within my rights,’ he said sternly, ‘if I merely told her when I have taken the position, and let her ask me to take her back—if she wishes.’

‘You have changed a great deal this last year,’ replied Biffen, shaking his head, ‘a great deal. I hope to see you your old self again before long. I should have declared it impossible for you to become so rugged. Go and see your wife, there’s a good fellow.’

‘No ; I shall write to her.’

‘Go and see her, I beg you ! No good ever came of letter-writing between two people who have misunderstood each other. Go to Westbourne Park to-morrow. And be reasonable ; be more than reasonable. The happiness of your life depends on what you do now. Be content to forget whatever wrong has been done you. To think that a man should need persuading to win back such a wife !’

In truth, there needed little persuasion. Per-

verseness, one of the forms or issues of self-pity, made him strive against his desire, and caused him to adopt a tone of acerbity in excess of what he felt ; but already he had made up his mind to see Amy. Even if this excuse had not presented itself, he must very soon have yielded to the longing for a sight of his wife's face which day by day increased among all the conflicting passions of which he was the victim. A month or two ago, when the summer sunshine made his confinement to the streets a daily torture, he convinced himself that there remained in him no trace of his love for Amy ; there were moments when he thought of her with repugnance, as a cold, selfish woman, who had feigned affection when it seemed her interest to do so, but brutally declared her true self when there was no longer anything to be hoped from him. That was the self-deception of misery. Love, even passion, was still alive in the depths of his being ; the animation with which he sped to his friend as soon as a new hope had risen was the best proof of his feeling.

He went home and wrote to Amy.

‘ I have a reason for wishing to see you. Will you have the kindness to appoint an hour on Sunday morning when I can speak with you

in private? It must be understood that I shall see no one else.'

She would receive this by the first post to-morrow, Saturday, and doubtless would let him hear in reply some time in the afternoon. Impatience allowed him little sleep, and the next day was a long weariness of waiting. The evening he would have to spend at the hospital; if there came no reply before the time of his leaving home, he knew not how he should compel himself to the ordinary routine of work. Yet the hour came, and he had heard nothing. He was tempted to go at once to Westbourne Park, but reason prevailed with him. When he again entered the house, having walked at his utmost speed from the City Road, the letter lay waiting for him; it had been pushed beneath his door, and when he struck a match he found that one of his feet was upon the white envelope.

Amy wrote that she would be at home at eleven to-morrow morning. Not another word.

In all probability she knew of the offer that had been made to him; Mrs. Carter would have told her. Was it of good or of ill omen that she wrote only these half-dozen words? Half through the night he plagued himself with sup-

positions, now thinking that her brevity promised a welcome, now that she wished to warn him against expecting anything but a cold, offended demeanour. At seven he was dressed ; two hours and a half had to be killed before he could start on his walk westward. He would have wandered about the streets, but it rained.

He had made himself as decent as possible in appearance, but he must necessarily seem an odd Sunday visitor at a house such as Mrs. Yule's. His soft felt hat, never brushed for months, was a greyish green, and stained round the band with perspiration. His necktie was discoloured and worn. Coat and waistcoat might pass muster, but of the trousers the less said the better. One of his boots was patched, and both were all but heelless.

Very well ; let her see him thus. Let her understand what it meant to live on twelve and sixpence a week.

Though it was cold and wet he could not put on his overcoat. Three years ago it had been a fairly good ulster ; at present, the edges of the sleeves were frayed, two buttons were missing, and the original hue of the cloth was indeterminable.

At half-past nine he set out and struggled with his shabby umbrella against wind and rain. Down Pentonville Hill, up Euston Road, all along Marylebone Road, then north-westwards towards the point of his destination. It was a good six miles from the one house to the other, but he arrived before the appointed time, and had to stray about until the cessation of bell-clanging and the striking of clocks told him it was eleven. Then he presented himself at the familiar door.

On his asking for Mrs. Reardon, he was at once admitted and led up to the drawing-room; the servant did not ask his name.

Then he waited for a minute or two, feeling himself a squalid wretch amid the dainty furniture. The door opened. Amy, in a simple but very becoming dress, approached to within a yard of him; after the first glance she had averted her eyes, and she did not offer to shake hands. He saw that his muddy and shapeless boots drew her attention.

‘Do you know why I have come?’ he asked.

He meant the tone to be conciliatory, but he could not command his voice, and it sounded rough, hostile.

‘I think so,’ Amy answered, seating herself

gracefully. She would have spoken with less dignity but for that accent of his.

‘The Carters have told you?’

‘Yes; I have heard about it.’

There was no promise in her manner. She kept her face turned away, and Reardon saw its beautiful profile, hard and cold as though in marble.

‘It doesn’t interest you at all?’

‘I am glad to hear that a better prospect offers for you.’

He did not sit down, and was holding his rusty hat behind his back.

‘You speak as if it in no way concerned yourself. Is that what you wish me to understand?’

‘Won’t it be better if you tell me why you have come here? As you are resolved to find offence in whatever I say, I prefer to keep silence. Please to let me know why you have asked to see me.’

Reardon turned abruptly as if to leave her, but checked himself at a little distance.

Both had come to this meeting prepared for a renewal of amity, but in these first few moments each was so disagreeably impressed by the look and language of the other that a revulsion of

feeling undid all the more hopeful effects of their long severance. On entering, Amy had meant to offer her hand, but the unexpected meanness of Reardon's aspect shocked and restrained her. All but every woman would have experienced that shrinking from the livery of poverty. Amy had but to reflect, and she understood that her husband could in no wise help this shabbiness; when he parted from her his wardrobe was already in a long-suffering condition, and how was he to have purchased new garments since then? None the less such attire degraded him in her eyes; it symbolized the melancholy decline which he had suffered intellectually. On Reardon his wife's elegance had the same repellent effect, though this would not have been the case but for the expression of her countenance. Had it been possible for them to remain together during the first five minutes without exchange of words, sympathies might have prevailed on both sides; the first speech uttered would most likely have harmonized with their gentler thoughts. But the mischief was done so speedily.

A man must indeed be graciously endowed if his personal appearance can defy the disadvantage of cheap modern clothing worn into shape-

lessness. Reardon had no such remarkable physique, and it was not wonderful that his wife felt ashamed of him. Strictly ashamed; he seemed to her a social inferior; the impression was so strong that it resisted all memory of his spiritual qualities. She might have anticipated this state of things, and have armed herself to encounter it, but somehow she had not done so. For more than five months she had been living among people who dressed well; the contrast was too suddenly forced upon her. She was especially susceptible in such matters, and had become none the less so under the demoralizing influence of her misfortunes. True, she soon began to feel ashamed of her shame, but that could not annihilate the natural feeling and its results.

‘I don’t love him. I can’t love him.’ Thus she spoke to herself, with immutable decision. She had been doubtful till now, but all doubt was at an end. Had Reardon been practical man enough to procure by hook or by crook a decent suit of clothes for this interview, that ridiculous trifle might have made all the difference in what was to result.

He turned again, and spoke with the harshness of a man who feels that he is despised

and is determined to show an equal contempt.

‘I came to ask you what you propose to do in case I go to Croydon.’

‘I have no proposal to make whatever.’

‘That means, then, that you are content to go on living here?’

‘If I have no choice, I must make myself content.’

‘But you have a choice.’

‘None has yet been offered me.’

‘Then I offer it now,’ said Reardon, speaking less aggressively. ‘I shall have a dwelling rent free, and a hundred and fifty pounds a year—perhaps it would be more in keeping with my station if I say that I shall have something less than three pounds a week. You can either accept from me half this money, as up to now, or come and take your place again as my wife. Please to decide what you will do.’

‘I will let you know by letter in a few days.’

It seemed impossible to her to say she would return, yet a refusal to do so involved nothing less than separation for the rest of their lives. Postponement of decision was her only resource.

‘I must know at once,’ said Reardon.

‘I can’t answer at once.’

‘If you don’t, I shall understand you to mean that you refuse to come to me. You know the circumstances ; there is no reason why you should consult with anyone else. You can answer me immediately if you will.’

‘I don’t wish to answer you immediately,’ Amy replied, paling slightly.

‘Then that decides it. When I leave you we are strangers to each other.’

Amy made a rapid study of his countenance. She had never entertained for a moment the supposition that his wits were unsettled, but none the less the constant recurrence of that idea in her mother’s talk had subtly influenced her against her husband. It had confirmed her in thinking that his behaviour was inexcusable. And now it seemed to her that anyone might be justified in holding him demented, so reckless was his utterance. It was difficult to know him as the man who had loved her so devotedly, who was incapable of an unkind word or look.

‘If that is what you prefer,’ she said, ‘there must be a formal separation. I can’t trust my future to your caprice.’

‘You mean it must be put into the hands of a lawyer.’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘That will be the best, no doubt.’

‘Very well; I will speak with my friends about it.’

‘Your friends!’ he exclaimed bitterly. ‘But for those friends of yours this would never have happened. I wish you had been alone in the world and penniless.’

‘A kind wish, all things considered.’

‘Yes, it is a kind wish. Then your marriage with me would have been binding; you would have known that my lot was yours, and the knowledge would have helped your weakness. I begin to see how much right there is on the side of those people who would keep women in subjection. You have been allowed to act with independence, and the result is that you have ruined my life and debased your own. If I had been strong enough to treat you as a child, and bid you follow me wherever my own fortunes led, it would have been as much better for you as for me. I was weak, and I suffer as all weak people do.’

‘You think it was my duty to share such a home as you have at present?’

‘You know it was. And if the choice had lain between that and earning your own liveli-

hood you would have thought that even such a poor home might be made tolerable. There were possibilities in you of better things than will ever come out now.'

There followed a silence. Amy sat with her eyes gloomily fixed on the carpet; Reardon looked about the room, but saw nothing. He had thrown his hat into a chair, and his fingers worked nervously together behind his back.

'Will you tell me,' he said at length, 'how your position is regarded by these friends of yours? I don't mean your mother and brother, but the people who come to this house.'

'I have not asked such people for their opinion.'

'Still, I suppose some sort of explanation has been necessary in your intercourse with them. How have you represented your relations with me?'

'I can't see that that concerns you.'

'In a manner it does. Certainly it matters very little to me how I am thought of by people of this kind, but one doesn't like to be reviled without cause. Have you allowed it to be supposed that I have made life with me intolerable for you?'

'No, I have not. You insult me by asking

the question, but as you don't seem to understand feelings of that kind I may as well answer you simply.'

'Then have you told them the truth? That I became so poor you couldn't live with me?'

'I have never said that in so many words, but no doubt it is understood. It must be known also that you refused to take the step which might have helped you out of your difficulties.'

'What step?'

She reminded him of his intention to spend half a year in working at the seaside.

'I had utterly forgotten it,' he returned with a mocking laugh. 'That shows how ridiculous such a thing would have been.'

'You are doing no literary work at all?' Amy asked.

'Do you imagine that I have the peace of mind necessary for anything of that sort?'

This was in a changed voice. It reminded her so strongly of her husband before his disasters that she could not frame a reply.

'Do you think I am able to occupy myself with the affairs of imaginary people?'

'I didn't necessarily mean fiction.'

'That I can forget myself, then, in the study

of literature?—I wonder whether you really think of me like that. How, in Heaven's name, do you suppose I spend my leisure time?'

She made no answer.

'Do you think I take this calamity as light-heartedly as you do, Amy?'

'I am far from taking it light-heartedly.'

'Yet you are in good health. I see no sign that you have suffered.'

She kept silence. Her suffering had been slight enough, and chiefly due to considerations of social propriety; but she would not avow this, and did not like to make admission of it to herself. Before her friends she frequently affected to conceal a profound sorrow; but so long as her child was left to her she was in no danger of falling a victim to sentimental troubles.

'And certainly I can't believe it,' he continued, 'now you declare your wish to be formally separated from me.'

'I have declared no such wish.'

'Indeed you have. If you can hesitate a moment about returning to me when difficulties are at an end, that tells me you would prefer final separation.'

'I hesitate for this reason,' Amy said after

reflecting. 'You are so very greatly changed from what you used to be, that I think it doubtful if I could live with you.'

'Changed?—Yes, that is true I am afraid. But how do you think this change will affect my behaviour to you?'

'Remember how you have been speaking to me.'

'And you think I should treat you brutally if you came into my power?'

'Not brutally, in the ordinary sense of the word. But with faults of temper which I couldn't bear. I have my own faults. I can't behave as meekly as some women can.'

It was a small concession, but Reardon made much of it.

'Did my faults of temper give you any trouble during the first year of our married life?' he asked gently.

'No,' she admitted.

'They began to afflict you when I was so hard driven by difficulties that I needed all your sympathy, all your forbearance. Did I receive much of either from you, Amy?'

'I think you did—until you demanded impossible things of me.'

'It was always in your power to rule me.'

What pained me worst, and hardened me against you, was that I saw you didn't care to exert your influence. There was never a time when I could have resisted a word of yours spoken out of your love for me. But even then, I am afraid, you no longer loved me, and now——'

He broke off, and stood watching her face.

'Have you *any* love for me left?' burst from his lips, as if the words all but choked him in the utterance.

Amy tried to shape some evasive answer, but could say nothing.

'Is there ever so small a hope that I might win some love from you again?'

'If you wish me to come and live with you when you go to Croydon I will do so.'

'But that is not answering me, Amy.'

'It's all I can say.'

'Then you mean that you would sacrifice yourself out of—what? Out of pity for me, let us say.'

'Do you wish to see Willie?' asked Amy, instead of replying.

'No. It is you I have come to see. The child is nothing to me, compared with you. It is you, who loved me, who became my wife—you only I care about. Tell me you will try to

be as you used to be. Give me only that hope, Amy ; I will ask nothing except that, now.'

'I can't say anything except that I will come to Croydon if you wish it.'

'And reproach me always because you have to live in such a place, away from your friends, without a hope of the social success which was your dearest ambition?'

Her practical denial that she loved him wrung this taunt from his anguished heart. He repented the words as soon as they were spoken.

'What is the good?' exclaimed Amy in irritation, rising and moving away from him. 'How can I pretend that I look forward to such a life with any hope?'

He stood in mute misery, inwardly cursing himself and his fate.

'I have said I will come,' she continued, her voice shaken with nervous tension. 'Ask me or not, as you please, when you are ready to go there. I can't talk about it.'

'I shall not ask you,' he replied. 'I will have no woman slave dragging out a weary life with me. Either you are my willing wife, or you are nothing to me.'

'I am married to you, and that can't be un-

done. I repeat that I shan't refuse to obey you. I shall say no more.'

She moved to a distance, and there seated herself, half turned from him.

'I shall never ask you to come,' said Reardon, breaking a short silence. 'If our married life is ever to begin again it must be of your seeking. Come to me of your own will, and I shall never reject you. But I will die in utter loneliness rather than ask you again.'

He lingered a few moments, watching her; she did not move. Then he took his hat, went in silence from the room, and left the house.

It rained harder than before. As no trains were running at this hour, he walked in the direction where he would be likely to meet with an omnibus. But it was a long time before one passed which was any use to him. When he reached home he was in cheerless plight enough; to make things pleasanter, one of his boots had let in water abundantly.

'The first sore throat of the season, no doubt,' he muttered to himself.

Nor was he disappointed. By Tuesday the cold had firm grip of him. A day or two of influenza or sore throat always made him so weak that with difficulty he supported the least

physical exertion ; but at present he must go to his work at the hospital. Why stay at home ? To what purpose spare himself ? It was not as if life had any promise for him. He was a machine for earning so much money a week, and would at least give faithful work for his wages until the day of final breakdown.

But, midway in the week, Carter discovered how ill his clerk was.

‘ You ought to be in bed, my dear fellow, with gruel and mustard plasters and all the rest of it. Go home and take care of yourself—I insist upon it.’

Before leaving the office, Reardon wrote a few lines to Biffen, whom he had visited on the Monday. ‘ Come and see me if you can. I am down with a bad cold, and have to keep in for the rest of the week. All the same, I feel far more cheerful. Bring a new chapter of your exhilarating romance.’

CHAPTER XXVI

MARRIED WOMAN'S PROPERTY

ON her return from church that Sunday Mrs. Edmund Yule was anxious to learn the result of the meeting between Amy and her husband. She hoped fervently that Amy's anomalous position would come to an end now that Reardon had the offer of something better than a mere clerkship. John Yule never ceased to grumble at his sister's permanence in the house, especially since he had learnt that the money sent by Reardon each month was not made use of; why it should not be applied for household expenses passed his understanding.

‘It seems to me,’ he remarked several times, ‘that the fellow only does his bare duty in sending it. What is it to anyone else whether he lives on twelve shillings a week or twelve pence? It is his business to support his wife; if he can't do that, to contribute as much to her support as possible. Amy's scruples are all very fine, if

she could afford them ; it's very nice to pay for your delicacies of feeling out of other people's pockets.'

'There'll have to be a formal separation,' was the startling announcement with which Amy answered her mother's inquiry as to what had passed.

'A separation? But, my dear——!'

Mrs. Yule could not express her disappointment and dismay.

'We couldn't live together; it's no use trying.'

'But at your age, Amy! How can you think of anything so shocking? And then, you know it will be impossible for him to make you a sufficient allowance.'

'I shall have to live as well as I can on the seventy-five pounds a year. If you can't afford to let me stay with you for that, I must go into cheap lodgings in the country, like poor Mrs. Butcher did.'

This was wild talking for Amy. The interview had upset her, and for the rest of the day she kept apart in her own room. On the morrow Mrs. Yule succeeded in eliciting a clear account of the conversation which had ended so hopelessly.

‘I would rather spend the rest of my days in the workhouse than beg him to take me back,’ was Amy’s final comment, uttered with the earnestness which her mother understood but too well.

‘But you are *willing* to go back, dear?’

‘I told him so.’

‘Then you must leave this to me. The Carters will let us know how things go on, and when it seems to be time I must see Edwin myself.’

‘I can’t allow that. Anything you could say on your own account would be useless, and there is nothing to say from me.’

Mrs. Yule kept her own counsel. She had a full month before her during which to consider the situation, but it was clear to her that these young people must be brought together again. Her estimate of Reardon’s mental condition had undergone a sudden change from the moment when she heard that a respectable post was within his reach; she decided that he was ‘strange,’ but then all men of literary talent had marked singularities, and doubtless she had been too hasty in interpreting the peculiar features natural to a character such as his.

A few days later arrived the news of their relative's death at Wattleborough.

This threw Mrs. Yule into a commotion. At first she decided to accompany her son and be present at the funeral ; after changing her mind twenty times, she determined not to go. John must send or bring back the news as soon as possible. That it would be of a nature sensibly to affect her own position, if not that of her children, she had little doubt ; her husband had been the favourite brother of the deceased, and on that account there was no saying how handsome a legacy she might receive. She dreamt of houses in South Kensington, of social ambitions gratified even thus late.

On the morning after the funeral came a postcard announcing John's return by a certain train, but no scrap of news was added.

‘Just like that irritating boy ! We must go to the station to meet him. You'll come, won't you, Amy ?’

Amy readily consented, for she too had hopes, though circumstances blurred them. Mother and daughter were walking about the platform half an hour before the train was due ; their agitation would have been manifest to anyone observing them. When at length the

train rolled in and John was discovered, they pressed eagerly upon him.

‘Don’t you excite yourself,’ he said gruffly to his mother. ‘There’s no reason whatever.’

Mrs. Yule glanced in dismay at Amy. They followed John to a cab, and took places with him.

‘Now don’t be provoking, Jack. Just tell us at once.’

‘By all means. You haven’t a penny.’

‘I haven’t? You are joking, ridiculous boy!’

‘Never felt less disposed to, I assure you.’

After staring out of the window for a minute or two, he at length informed Amy of the extent to which she profited by her uncle’s decease, then made known what was bequeathed to himself. His temper grew worse every moment, and he replied savagely to each successive question concerning the other items of the will.

‘What have you to grumble about?’ asked Amy, whose face was exultant notwithstanding the drawbacks attaching to her good fortune. ‘If Uncle Alfred receives nothing at all, and mother has nothing, you ought to think yourself very lucky.’

‘It’s very easy for you to say that, with your ten thousand.’

‘But is it her own?’ asked Mrs. Yule. ‘Is it for her separate use?’

‘Of course it is. She gets the benefit of last year’s Married Woman’s Property Act. The will was executed in January this year, and I dare say the old curmudgeon destroyed a former one.’

‘What a splendid Act of Parliament that is!’ cried Amy. ‘The only one worth anything that I ever heard of.’

‘But my dear——’ began her mother, in a tone of protest. However, she reserved her comment for a more fitting time and place, and merely said: ‘I wonder whether he had heard what has been going on?’

‘Do you think he would have altered his will if he had?’ asked Amy with a smile of security.

‘Why the deuce he should have left you so much in any case is more than I can understand,’ growled her brother. ‘What’s the use to me of a paltry thousand or two? It isn’t enough to invest; isn’t enough to do anything with.’

‘You may depend upon it your cousin

Marian thinks her five thousand good for something,' said Mrs. Yule. 'Who was at the funeral? Don't be so surly, Jack; tell us all about it. I'm sure if anyone has cause to be ill-tempered it's poor me.'

Thus they talked, amid the rattle of the cab-wheels. By when they reached home silence had fallen upon them, and each one was sufficiently occupied with private thoughts.

Mrs. Yule's servants had a terrible time of it for the next few days. Too affectionate to turn her ill-temper against John and Amy, she relieved herself by severity to the domestic slaves, as an English matron is of course justified in doing. Her daughter's position caused her even more concern than before; she constantly lamented to herself: 'Oh, why didn't he die before she was married!'—in which case Amy would never have dreamt of wedding a penniless author. Amy declined to discuss the new aspect of things until twenty-four hours after John's return; then she said:

'I shall do nothing whatever until the money is paid to me. And what I shall do then I don't know.'

'You are sure to hear from Edwin,' opined Mrs. Yule.

‘I think not. He isn’t the kind of man to behave in that way.’

‘Then I suppose you are bound to take the first step?’

‘That I shall never do.’

She said so, but the sudden happiness of finding herself wealthy was not without its softening effect on Amy’s feelings. Generous impulses alternated with moods of discontent. The thought of her husband in his squalid lodgings tempted her to forget injuries and disillusion, and to play the part of a generous wife. It would be possible now for them to go abroad and spend a year or two in healthful travel; the result in Reardon’s case might be wonderful. He might recover all the energy of his imagination, and resume his literary career from the point he had reached at the time of his marriage.

On the other hand, was it not more likely that he would lapse into a life of scholarly self-indulgence, such as he had often told her was his ideal? In that event, what tedium and regret lay before her! Ten thousand pounds sounded well, but what did it represent in reality? A poor four hundred a year, perhaps; mere decency of obscure existence, unless her husband could glorify it by winning fame. If

he did nothing, she would be the wife of a man who had failed in literature. She would not be able to take a place in society. Life would be supported without struggle; nothing more to be hoped.

This view of the future possessed her strongly when, on the second day, she went to communicate her news to Mrs. Carter. This amiable lady had now become what she always desired to be, Amy's intimate friend; they saw each other very frequently, and conversed of most things with much frankness. It was between eleven and twelve in the morning when Amy paid her visit, and she found Mrs. Carter on the point of going out.

'I was coming to see you,' cried Edith. 'Why haven't you let me know of what has happened?'

'You have heard, I suppose?'

'Albert heard from your brother.'

'I supposed he would. And I haven't felt in the mood for talking about it, even with you.'

They went into Mrs. Carter's boudoir, a tiny room full of such pretty things as can be purchased nowadays by anyone who has a few shillings to spare, and tolerable taste either of their own or at second-hand. Had she been

left to her instincts, Edith would have surrounded herself with objects representing a much earlier stage of artistic development ; but she was quick to imitate what fashion declared becoming. Her husband regarded her as a remarkable authority in all matters of personal or domestic ornamentation.

‘And what are you going to do?’ she inquired, examining Amy from head to foot, as if she thought that the inheritance of so substantial a sum must have produced visible changes in her friend.

‘I am going to do nothing.’

‘But surely you’re not in low spirits?’

‘What have I to rejoice about?’

They talked for a while before Amy brought herself to utter what she was thinking.

‘Isn’t it a most ridiculous thing that married people who both wish to separate can’t do so and be quite free again?’

‘I suppose it would lead to all sorts of troubles—don’t you think?’

‘So people say about every new step in civilisation. What would have been thought twenty years ago of a proposal to make all married women independent of their husbands in money matters? All sorts of absurd dangers

were foreseen, no doubt. And it's the same now about divorce. In America people can get divorced if they don't suit each other—at all events in some of the States—and does any harm come of it? Just the opposite I should think.'

Edith mused. Such speculations were daring, but she had grown accustomed to think of Amy as an 'advanced' woman, and liked to imitate her in this respect.

'It does seem reasonable,' she murmured.

'The law ought to encourage such separations, instead of forbidding them,' Amy pursued. 'If a husband and wife find that they have made a mistake, what useless cruelty it is to condemn them to suffer the consequences for the whole of their lives!'

'I suppose it's to make people careful,' said Edith with a laugh.

'If so, we know that it has always failed, and always will fail; so the sooner such a profitless law is altered the better. Isn't there some society for getting that kind of reform? I would subscribe fifty pounds a year to help it. Wouldn't you?'

'Yes, if I had it to spare,' replied the other.

Then they both laughed, but Edith the more naturally.

‘Not on my own account, you know,’ she added.

‘It’s because women who are happily married can’t and won’t understand the position of those who are not that there’s so much difficulty in reforming marriage laws.’

‘But I understand you, Amy, and I grieve about you. What you are to do I can’t think.’

‘Oh, it’s easy to see what I shall do. Of course I have no choice really. And I *ought* to have a choice; that’s the hardship and the wrong of it. Perhaps if I had, I should find a sort of pleasure in sacrificing myself.’

There were some new novels on the table; Amy took up a volume presently, and glanced over a page or two.

‘I don’t know how you can go on reading that sort of stuff, book after book,’ she exclaimed.

‘Oh, but people say this last novel of Markland’s is one of his best.’

‘Best or worst, novels are all the same. Nothing but love, love, love; what silly nonsense it is! Why don’t people write about the really important things of life? Some of the

French novelists do ; several of Balzac's, for instance. I have just been reading his "Cousin Pons," a terrible book, but I enjoyed it ever so much because it was nothing like a love story. What rubbish is printed about love !'

'I get rather tired of it sometimes,' admitted Edith with amusement.

'I should hope you do, indeed. What downright lies are accepted as indisputable ! That about love being a woman's whole life ; who believes it really ? Love is the most insignificant thing in most women's lives. It occupies a few months, possibly a year or two, and even then I doubt if it is often the first consideration.'

Edith held her head aside, and pondered smilingly.

'I'm sure there's a great opportunity for some clever novelist who will never write about love at all.'

'But then it *does* come into life.'

'Yes, for a month or two, as I say. Think of the biographies of men and women ; how many pages are devoted to their love affairs ? Compare those books with novels which profess to be biographies, and you see how false such pictures are. Think of the very words "novel,"

“romance”—what do they mean but exaggeration of one bit of life?’

‘That may be true. But why do people find the subject so interesting?’

‘Because there is so little love in real life. That’s the truth of it. Why do poor people care only for stories about the rich? The same principle.’

‘How clever you are, Amy!’

‘Am I? It’s very nice to be told so. Perhaps I have some cleverness of a kind; but what use is it to me? My life is being wasted. I ought to have a place in the society of clever people. I was never meant to live quietly in the background. Oh, if I hadn’t been in such a hurry, and so inexperienced!’

‘Oh, I wanted to ask you,’ said Edith, soon after this. ‘Do you wish Albert to say anything about you—at the hospital?’

‘There’s no reason why he shouldn’t.’

‘You won’t even write to say——?’

‘I shall do nothing.’

Since the parting from her husband, there had proceeded in Amy a noticeable maturing of intellect. Probably the one thing was a consequence of the other. During that last year in

the flat her mind was held captive by material cares, and this arrest of her natural development doubtless had much to do with the appearance of acerbity in a character which had displayed so much sweetness, so much womanly grace. Moreover, it was arrest at a critical point. When she fell in love with Edwin Reardon her mind had still to undergo the culture of circumstances ; though a woman in years she had seen nothing of life but a few phases of artificial society, and her education had not progressed beyond the final school-girl stage. Submitting herself to Reardon's influence, she passed through what was a highly useful training of the intellect ; but with the result that she became clearly conscious of the divergence between herself and her husband. In endeavouring to imbue her with his own literary tastes, Reardon instructed Amy as to the natural tendencies of her mind, which till then she had not clearly understood. When she ceased to read with the eyes of passion, most of the things which were Reardon's supreme interests lost their value for her. A sound intelligence enabled her to think and feel in many directions, but the special line of her growth lay apart from that in which the novelist and classical scholar had directed her.

When she found herself alone and independent, her mind acted like a spring when pressure is removed. After a few weeks of *désœuvrement* she obeyed the impulse to occupy herself with a kind of reading alien to Reardon's sympathies. The solid periodicals attracted her, and especially those articles which dealt with themes of social science. Anything that savoured of newness and boldness in philosophic thought had a charm for her palate. She read a good deal of that kind of literature which may be defined as specialism popularised ; writing which addresses itself to educated, but not strictly studious, persons, and which forms the reservoir of conversation for society above the sphere of turf and west-endism. Thus, for instance, though she could not undertake the volumes of Herbert Spencer, she was intelligently acquainted with the tenor of their contents ; and though she had never opened one of Darwin's books, her knowledge of his main theories and illustrations was respectable. She was becoming a typical woman of the new time, the woman who has developed concurrently with journalistic enterprise.

Not many days after that conversation with Edith Carter, she had occasion to visit Mudie's,

for the new number of some periodical which contained an appetising title. As it was a sunny and warm day she walked to New Oxford Street from the nearest Metropolitan station. Whilst waiting at the library counter, she heard a familiar voice in her proximity; it was that of Jasper Milvain, who stood talking with a middle-aged lady. As Amy turned to look at him his eye met hers; clearly he had been aware of her. The review she desired was handed to her; she moved aside, and turned over the pages. Then Milvain walked up.

He was armed *cap-à-pie* in the fashions of suave society; no Bohemianism of garb or person, for Jasper knew he could not afford that kind of economy. On her part, Amy was much better dressed than usual, a costume suited to her position of bereaved heiress.

‘What a time since we met!’ said Jasper, taking her delicately gloved hand and looking into her face with his most effective smile.

‘And why?’ asked Amy.

‘Indeed, I hardly know. I hope Mrs. Yule is well?’

‘Quite, thank you.’

It seemed as if he would draw back to let her pass, and so make an end of the colloquy.

But Amy, though she moved forward, added a remark :

‘ I don’t see your name in any of this month’s magazines.’

‘ I have nothing signed this month. A short review in *The Current*, that’s all.’

‘ But I suppose you write as much as ever ? ’

‘ Yes ; but chiefly in weekly papers just now. You don’t see the *Will-o’-the-Wisp* ? ’

‘ Oh yes. And I think I can generally recognise your hand.’

They issued from the library.

‘ Which way are you going ? ’ Jasper inquired, with something more of the old freedom.

‘ I walked from Gower Street station, and I think, as it’s so fine, I shall walk back again.’

He accompanied her. They turned up Museum Street, and Amy, after a short silence, made inquiry concerning his sisters.

‘ I am sorry I saw them only once, but no doubt you thought it better to let the acquaintance end there.’

‘ I really didn’t think of it in that way at all,’ Jasper replied.

‘ We naturally understood it so, when you even ceased to call, yourself.’

‘But don’t you feel that there would have been a good deal of awkwardness in my coming to Mrs. Yule’s?’

‘Seeing that you looked at things from my husband’s point of view?’

‘Oh, that’s a mistake! I have only seen your husband once since he went to Islington.’

Amy gave him a look of surprise.

‘You are not on friendly terms with him?’

‘Well, we have drifted apart. For some reason he seemed to think that my companionship was not very profitable. So it was better, on the whole, that I should see neither you nor him.’

Amy was wondering whether he had heard of her legacy. He might have been informed by a Wattleborough correspondent, even if no one in London had told him.

‘Do your sisters keep up their friendship with my cousin Marian?’ she asked, quitting the previous difficult topic.

‘Oh yes!’ He smiled. ‘They see a great deal of each other.’

‘Then of course you have heard of my uncle’s death?’

‘Yes. I hope all your difficulties are now at an end.’

Amy delayed a moment, then said : ‘I hope so,’ without any emphasis.

‘Do you think of spending this winter abroad?’

It was the nearest he could come to a question concerning the future of Amy and her husband.

‘Everything is still quite uncertain. But tell me something about our old acquaintances. How does Mr. Biffen get on?’

‘I scarcely ever see him, but I think he pegs away at an interminable novel, which no one will publish when it’s done. Whelpdale I meet occasionally.’

He talked of the latter’s projects and achievements in a lively strain.

‘Your own prospects continue to brighten, no doubt,’ said Amy.

‘I really think they do. Things go fairly well. And I have lately received a promise of very valuable help.’

‘From whom?’

‘A relative of yours.’

Amy turned to interrogate him with a look.

‘A relative? You mean——?’

‘Yes; Marian.’

They were passing Bedford Square. Amy

glanced at the trees, now almost bare of foliage ; then her eyes met Jasper's, and she smiled significantly.

‘I should have thought your aim would have been far more ambitious,’ she said, with distinct utterance.

‘Marian and I have been engaged for some time—practically.’

‘Indeed? I remember now how you once spoke of her. And you will be married soon?’

‘Probably before the end of the year. I see that you are criticising my motives. I am quite prepared for that in everyone who knows me and the circumstances. But you must remember that I couldn't foresee anything of this kind. It enables us to marry sooner, that's all.’

‘I am sure your motives are unassailable,’ replied Amy, still with a smile. ‘I imagined that you wouldn't marry for years, and then some distinguished person. This throws new light upon your character.’

‘You thought me so desperately scheming and cold-blooded?’

‘Oh dear no! But—well, to be sure, I can't say that I know Marian. I haven't seen her for years and years. She may be admirably suited to you.’

‘Depend upon it, I think so.’

‘She’s likely to shine in society? She is a brilliant girl, full of tact and insight?’

‘Scarcely all that, perhaps.’

He looked dubiously at his companion.

‘Then you have abandoned your old ambitions?’ Amy pursued.

‘Not a bit of it. I am on the way to achieve them.’

‘And Marian is the ideal wife to assist you?’

‘From one point of view, yes. Pray, why all this ironic questioning?’

‘Not ironic at all.’

‘It sounded very much like it, and I know from of old that you have a tendency that way.’

‘The news surprised me a little, I confess. But I see that I am in danger of offending you.’

‘Let us wait another five years, and then I will ask your opinion as to the success of my marriage. I don’t take a step of this kind without maturely considering it. Have I made many blunders as yet?’

‘As yet, not that I know of.’

‘Do I impress you as one likely to commit follies?’

‘I had rather wait a little before answering that.’

‘That is to say, you prefer to prophesy after the event. Very well, we shall see.’

In the length of Gower Street they talked of several other things less personal. By degrees the tone of their conversation had become what it was used to be, now and then almost confidential.

‘You are still at the same lodgings?’ asked Amy, as they drew near to the railway station.

‘I moved yesterday, so that the girls and I could be under the same roof—until the next change.’

‘You will let us know when that takes place?’

He promised, and with exchange of smiles which were something like a challenge they took leave of each other.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LONELY MAN

A TOUCH of congestion in the right lung was a warning to Reardon that his half-year of insufficient food and general waste of strength would make the coming winter a hard time for him, worse probably than the last. Biffen, responding in person to the summons, found him in bed, waited upon by a gaunt, dry, sententious woman of sixty—not the landlady, but a lodger who was glad to earn one meal a day by any means that offered.

‘It wouldn’t be very nice to die here, would it?’ said the sufferer, with a laugh which was cut short by a cough. ‘One would like a comfortable room, at least. Why, I don’t know. I dreamt last night that I was in a ship that had struck something and was going down; and it wasn’t the thought of death that most disturbed me, but a horror of being plunged in the icy water. In fact, I have had just the same feeling

on shipboard. I remember waking up midway between Corfu and Brindisi, on that shaky tub of a Greek boat; we were rolling a good deal, and I heard a sort of alarmed rush and shouting up on deck. It was so warm and comfortable in the berth, and I thought with intolerable horror of the possibility of sousing into the black depths.'

'Don't talk, my boy,' advised Biffen. 'Let me read you the new chapter of "Mr. Bailey." It may induce a refreshing slumber.'

Reardon was away from his duties for a week; he returned to them with a feeling of extreme shakiness, an indisposition to exert himself, and a complete disregard of the course that events were taking. It was fortunate that he had kept aside that small store of money designed for emergencies; he was able to draw on it now to pay his doctor, and provide himself with better nourishment than usual. He purchased new boots, too, and some articles of warm clothing of which he stood in need—an alarming outlay.

A change had come over him; he was no longer rendered miserable by thoughts of Amy—seldom, indeed, turned his mind to her at all. His secretaryship at Croydon was a haven within

view; the income of seventy-five pounds (the other half to go to his wife) would support him luxuriously, and for anything beyond that he seemed to care little. Next Sunday he was to go over to Croydon and see the institution.

One evening of calm weather he made his way to Clipstone Street and greeted his friend with more show of light-heartedness than he had been capable of for at least two years.

‘I have been as nearly as possible a happy man all to-day,’ he said, when his pipe was well lit. ‘Partly the sunshine, I suppose. There’s no saying if the mood will last, but if it does all is well with me. I regret nothing and wish for nothing.’

‘A morbid state of mind,’ was Biffen’s opinion.

‘No doubt of that, but I am content to be indebted to morbidness. One must have a rest from misery somehow. Another kind of man would have taken to drinking; that has tempted me now and then, I assure you. But I couldn’t afford it. Did you ever feel tempted to drink merely for the sake of forgetting trouble?’

‘Often enough. I have done it. I have deliberately spent a certain proportion of the

money that ought to have gone for food in the cheapest kind of strong liquor.'

'Ha! that's interesting. But it never got the force of a habit you had to break?'

'No. Partly, I dare say, because I had the warning of poor Sykes before my eyes.'

'You never see that poor fellow?'

'Never. He must be dead, I think. He would die either in the hospital or the work-house.'

'Well,' said Reardon, musing cheerfully, 'I shall never become a drunkard; I haven't that diathesis, to use your expression. Doesn't it strike you that you and I are very respectable persons? We really have no vices. Put us on a social pedestal, and we should be shining lights of morality. I sometimes wonder at our inoffensiveness. Why don't we run amuck against law and order? Why, at the least, don't we become savage revolutionists, and harangue in Regent's Park of a Sunday?'

'Because we are passive beings, and were meant to enjoy life very quietly. As we can't enjoy, we just suffer quietly, that's all. By-the-by, I want to talk about a difficulty in one of the Fragments of Euripides. Did you ever go through the Fragments?'

This made a diversion for half an hour. Then Reardon returned to his former line of thought.

‘As I was entering patients yesterday, there came up to the table a tall, good-looking, very quiet girl, poorly dressed, but as neat as could be. She gave me her name, then I asked “Occupation?” She said at once, “I’m unfortunate, sir.” I couldn’t help looking up at her in surprise; I had taken it for granted she was a dressmaker or something of the kind. And, do you know, I never felt so strong an impulse to shake hands, to show sympathy, and even respect, in some way. I should have liked to say, “Why, I am unfortunate, too!” such a good, patient face she had.’

‘I distrust such appearances,’ said Biffen in his quality of realist.

‘Well, so do I, as a rule. But in this case they were convincing. And there was no need whatever for her to make such a declaration; she might just as well have said anything else; it’s the merest form. I shall always hear her voice saying, “I’m unfortunate, sir.” She made me feel what a mistake it was for me to marry such a girl as Amy. I ought to have looked about for some simple, kind-hearted work-girl;

that was the kind of wife indicated for me by circumstances. If I had earned a hundred a year she would have thought we were well-to-do. I should have been an authority to her on everything under the sun—and above it. No ambition would have unsettled her. We should have lived in a couple of poor rooms somewhere, and—we should have loved each other.’

‘What a shameless idealist you are!’ said Biffen shaking his head. ‘Let me sketch the true issue of such a marriage. To begin with, the girl would have married you in firm persuasion that you were a “gentleman” in temporary difficulties, and that before long you would have plenty of money to dispose of. Disappointed in this hope, she would have grown sharp-tempered, querulous, selfish. All your endeavours to make her understand you would only have resulted in widening the impassable gulf. She would have misconstrued your every sentence, found food for suspicion in every harmless joke, tormented you with the vulgarest forms of jealousy. The effect upon your nature would have been degrading. In the end, you must have abandoned every effort to raise her to your own level, and either have sunk to hers or made a rupture. Who doesn’t know the story of such

attempts? I myself, ten years ago, was on the point of committing such a folly, but, Heaven be praised! an accident saved me.'

'You never told me that story.'

'And don't care to now. I prefer to forget it.'

'Well, you can judge for yourself, but not for me. Of course I might have chosen the wrong girl, but I am supposing that I had been fortunate. In any case there would have been a much better chance than in the marriage that I made.'

'Your marriage was sensible enough, and a few years hence you will be a happy man again.'

'You seriously think Amy will come back to me?'

'Of course I do.'

'Upon my word, I don't know that I desire it.'

'Because you are in a strangely unhealthy state.'

'I rather think I regard the matter more sanely than ever yet. I am quite free from sexual bias. I can see that Amy was not my fit intellectual companion, and all emotion at the thought of her has gone from me. The word "love" is a weariness to me. If only our idiotic

laws permitted us to break the legal bond, how glad both of us would be!’

‘You are depressed and anæmic. Get yourself in flesh; and view things like a man of this world.’

‘But don’t you think it the best thing that can happen to a man if he outgrows passion?’

‘In certain circumstances, no doubt.’

‘In all and any. [The best moments of life are those when we contemplate beauty in the purely artistic spirit—objectively. I have had such moments in Greece and Italy; times when I was a free spirit, utterly remote from the temptations and harassings of sexual emotion. What we call love is mere turmoil. Who wouldn’t release himself from it for ever, if the possibility offered?’]

‘Oh, there’s a good deal to be said for that, of course.’

Reardon’s face was illumined with the glow of an exquisite memory.

‘Haven’t I told you,’ he said, ‘of that marvellous sunset at Athens? I was on the Pnyx; had been rambling about there the whole afternoon. For I dare say a couple of hours I had noticed a growing rift of light in the clouds to the west; it looked as if the dull day might

have a rich ending. That rift grew broader and brighter—the only bit of light in the sky. On Parnes there were white strips of ragged mist, hanging very low; the same on Hymettus, and even the peak of Lycabettus was just hidden. Of a sudden, the sun's rays broke out. They showed themselves first in a strangely beautiful way, striking from behind the seaward hills through the pass that leads to Eleusis, and so gleaming on the nearer slopes of Aigaleos, making the clefts black and the rounded parts of the mountain wonderfully brilliant with golden colour. All the rest of the landscape, remember, was untouched with a ray of light. This lasted only a minute or two, then the sun itself sank into the open patch of sky and shot glory in every direction; broadening beams smote upwards over the dark clouds, and made them a lurid yellow. To the left of the sun, the gulf of Ægina was all golden mist, the islands floating in it vaguely. To the right, over black Salamis, lay delicate strips of pale blue—indescribably pale and delicate.'

'You remember it very clearly.'

'As if I saw it now! But wait. I turned eastward, and there to my astonishment was a magnificent rainbow, a perfect semicircle, stretch-

ing from the foot of Parnes to that of Hymettus, framing Athens and its hills, which grew brighter and brighter—the brightness for which there is no name among colours. Hymettus was of a soft misty warmth, a something tending to purple, its ridges marked by exquisitely soft and indefinite shadows, the rainbow coming right down in front. The Acropolis simply glowed and blazed. As the sun descended all these colours grew richer and warmer; for a moment the landscape was nearly crimson. Then suddenly the sun passed into the lower stratum of cloud, and the splendour died almost at once, except that there remained the northern half of the rainbow, which had become double. In the west, the clouds were still glorious for a time; there were two shaped like great expanded wings, edged with refulgence.’

‘Stop!’ cried Biffen, ‘or I shall clutch you by the throat. I warned you before that I can’t stand those reminiscences.’

‘Live in hope. Scrape together twenty pounds, and go there, if you die of hunger afterwards.’

‘I shall never have twenty shillings,’ was the despondent answer.

‘I feel sure you will sell “Mr. Bailey.”’

‘It’s kind of you to encourage me; but if “Mr. Bailey” is ever sold I don’t mind undertaking to eat my duplicate of the proofs.’

‘But now, you remember what led me to that. What does a man care for any woman on earth when he is absorbed in contemplation of that kind?’

‘But it is only one of life’s satisfactions.’

‘I am only maintaining that it is the best, and infinitely preferable to sexual emotion. It leaves, no doubt, no bitterness of any kind. Poverty can’t rob me of those memories. I have lived in an ideal world that was not deceitful, a world which seems to me, when I recall it, beyond the human sphere, bathed in diviner light.’

It was four or five days after this that Reardon, on going to his work in City Road, found a note from Carter. It requested him to call at the main hospital at half-past eleven the next morning. He supposed the appointment had something to do with his business at Croydon, whither he had been in the mean time. Some unfavourable news, perhaps; any misfortune was likely.

He answered the summons punctually, and

on entering the general office was requested by the clerk to wait in Mr. Carter's private room; the secretary had not yet arrived. His waiting lasted some ten minutes, then the door opened and admitted, not Carter, but Mrs. Edmund Yule.

Reardon stood up in perturbation. He was anything but prepared, or disposed, for an interview with this lady. She came towards him with hand extended and a countenance of suave friendliness.

'I doubted whether you would see me if I let you know,' she said. 'Forgive me this little bit of scheming, will you? I have something so very important to speak to you about.'

He said nothing, but kept a demeanour of courtesy.

'I think you haven't heard from Amy?' Mrs. Yule asked.

'Not since I saw her.'

'And you don't know what has come to pass?'

'I have heard of nothing.'

'I am come to see you quite on my own responsibility, quite. I took Mr. Carter into my confidence, but begged him not to let Mrs. Carter know, lest she should tell Amy; I think

he will keep his promise. It seemed to me that it was really my duty to do whatever I could in these sad, sad circumstances.'

Reardon listened respectfully, but without sign of feeling.

'I had better tell you at once that Amy's uncle at Wattleborough is dead, and that in his will he has bequeathed her ten thousand pounds.'

Mrs. Yule watched the effect of this. For a moment none was visible, but she saw at length that Reardon's lips trembled and his eyebrows twitched.

'I am glad to hear of her good fortune,' he said distantly and in even tones.

'You will feel, I am sure,' continued his mother-in-law, 'that this must put an end to your most unhappy differences.'

'How can it have that result?'

'It puts you both in a very different position, does it not? But for your distressing circumstances, I am sure there would never have been such unpleasantness—never. Neither you nor Amy is the kind of person to take a pleasure in disagreement. Let me beg you to go and see her again. Everything is so different now. Amy has not the faintest idea that I have come to see you, and she mustn't on any account be told,

for her worst fault is that sensitive pride of hers. And I'm sure you won't be offended, Edwin, if I say that you have very much the same failing. Between two such sensitive people differences might last a lifetime, unless one could be persuaded to take the first step. Do be generous! A woman is privileged to be a little obstinate, it is always said. Overlook the fault, and persuade her to let bygones be bygones.'

There was an involuntary affectedness in Mrs. Yule's speech which repelled Reardon. He could not even put faith in her assurance that Amy knew nothing of this intercession. In any case it was extremely distasteful to him to discuss such matters with Mrs. Yule.

'Under no circumstances could I do more than I already have done,' he replied. 'And after what you have told me, it is impossible for me to go and see her unless she expressly invites me.'

'Oh, if only you would overcome this sensitiveness!'

'It is not in my power to do so. My poverty, as you justly say, was the cause of our parting; but if Amy is no longer poor, that is very far from a reason why I should go to her as a suppliant for forgiveness.'

‘But do consider the facts of the case, independently of feeling. I really think I don’t go too far in saying that at least some—some provocation was given by you first of all. I am so very, very far from wishing to say anything disagreeable—I am sure you feel that—but wasn’t there some little ground for complaint on Amy’s part? Wasn’t there, now?’

Reardon was tortured with nervousness. He wished to be alone, to think over what had happened, and Mrs. Yule’s urgent voice rasped upon his ears. Its very smoothness made it worse.

‘There may have been ground for grief and concern,’ he answered, ‘but for complaint, no, I think not.’

‘But I understand’—the voice sounded rather irritable now—‘that you positively reproached and upbraided her because she was reluctant to go and live in some very shocking place.’

‘I may have lost my temper after Amy had shown—— But I can’t review our troubles in this way.’

‘Am I to plead in vain?’

‘I regret very much that I can’t possibly do as you wish. It is all between Amy and my-

self. Interference by other people cannot do any good.'

'I am sorry you should use such a word as "interference,"' replied Mrs. Yule, bridling a little. 'Very sorry, indeed. I confess it didn't occur to me that my good-will to you could be seen in that light.'

'Believe me that I didn't use the word offensively.'

'Then you refuse to take any step towards a restoration of good feeling?'

'I am obliged to, and Amy would understand perfectly why I say so.'

His earnestness was so unmistakable that Mrs. Yule had no choice but to rise and bring the interview to an end. She commanded herself sufficiently to offer a regretful hand.

'I can only say that my daughter is very, very unfortunate.'

Reardon lingered a little after her departure, then left the hospital and walked at a rapid pace in no particular direction.

Ah! if this had happened in the first year of his marriage, what more blessed man than he would have walked the earth! But it came after irreparable harm. No amount of wealth could undo the ruin caused by poverty.

It was natural for him, as soon as he could think with deliberation, to turn towards his only friend. But on calling at the house in Clipstone Street he found the garret empty, and no one could tell him when its occupant was likely to be back. He left a note, and made his way back to Islington. The evening had to be spent at the hospital, but on his return Biffen sat waiting for him.

‘You called about twelve, didn’t you?’ the visitor inquired.

‘Half-past.’

‘I was at the police-court. Odd thing—but it always happens so—that I should have spoken of Sykes the other night. Last night I came upon a crowd in Oxford Street, and the nucleus of it was no other than Sykes himself, very drunk and disorderly, in the grip of two policemen. Nothing could be done for him; I was useless as bail; he e’en had to sleep in the cell. But I went this morning to see what would become of him. Such a spectacle when they brought him forward! It was only five shillings fine, and to my astonishment he produced the money. I joined him outside—it required a little courage—and had a long talk with him. He’s writing a London Letter for

some provincial daily, and the first payment had thrown him off his balance.'

Reardon laughed gaily, and made inquiries about the eccentric gentleman. Only when the subject was exhausted did he speak of his own concerns, relating quietly what he had learnt from Mrs. Yule. Biffen's eyes widened.

'So,' Reardon cried with exultation, 'there is the last burden off my mind! Henceforth I haven't a care! The only thing that still troubled me was my inability to give Amy enough to live upon. Now she is provided for *in secula seculorum*. Isn't this grand news?'

'Decidedly. But if she is provided for, so are you.'

'Biffen, you know me better. Could I accept a farthing of her money? This has made our coming together again for ever impossible, unless—unless dead things can come to life. I know the value of money, but I can't take it from Amy.'

The other kept silence.

'No! But now everything is well. She has her child, and can devote herself to bringing the boy up. And I—but I shall be rich on my own account. A hundred and fifty a year; it would be a farce to offer Amy her share of

it. By all the gods of Olympus, we will go to Greece together, you and I!’

‘Pooh!’

‘I swear it! Let me save for a couple of years, and then get a good month’s holiday, or more if possible, and, as Pallas Athene liveth! we shall find ourselves at Marseilles, going aboard some boat of the Messageries. I can’t believe yet that this is true. Come, we will have a supper to night. Come out into Upper Street, and let us eat, drink, and be merry!’

‘You are beside yourself. But never mind; let us rejoice by all means. There’s every reason.’

‘That poor girl! Now, at last, she’ll be at ease.’

‘Who?’

‘Amy, of course! I’m delighted on her account. Ah! but if it had come a long time ago, in the happy days! Then she, too, would have gone to Greece, wouldn’t she? Everything in life comes too soon or too late. What it would have meant for her and for me! She would never have hated me then, never. Biffen, am I base or contemptible? She thinks so. That’s how poverty has served me. If you had seen her, how she looked at me, when we met the other day, you would understand well

enough why I couldn't live with her now, not if she entreated me to. That would make me base if you like. Gods! how ashamed I should be if I yielded to such a temptation! And once——'

He had worked himself to such intensity of feeling that at length his voice choked and tears burst from his eyes.

'Come out, and let us have a walk,' said Biffen.

On leaving the house they found themselves in a thick fog, through which trickled drops of warm rain. Nevertheless, they pursued their purpose, and presently were seated in one of the boxes of a small coffee-shop. Their only companion in the place was a cab-driver, who had just finished a meal, and was now nodding into slumber over his plate and cup. Reardon ordered fried ham and eggs, the luxury of the poor, and when the attendant woman was gone away to execute the order, he burst into excited laughter.

'Here we sit, two literary men! How should we be regarded by——'

He named two or three of the successful novelists of the day.

'With what magnificent scorn they would

turn from us and our squalid feast ! They have never known struggle ; not they. They are public-school men, University men, club men, society men. An income of less than three or four hundred a year is inconceivable to them ; that seems the minimum for an educated man's support. It would be small-minded to think of them with rancour, but, by Apollo ! I know that we should change places with them if the work we have done were justly weighed against theirs.'

'What does it matter ? We are different types of intellectual workers. I think of them savagely now and then, but only when hunger gets a trifle too keen. Their work answers a demand ; ours—or mine at all events—doesn't. They are in touch with the reading multitude ; they have the sentiments of the respectable ; they write for their class. Well, you had *your* circle of readers, and, if things hadn't gone against you, by this time you certainly could have counted on your three or four hundred a year.'

'It's unlikely that I should ever have got more than two hundred pounds for a book ; and, to have kept at my best, I must have been content to publish once every two or three

years. The position was untenable with no private income. And I must needs marry a wife of dainty instincts! What astounding impudence! No wonder Fate pitched me aside into the gutter.'

They ate their ham and eggs, and exhilarated themselves with a cup of chicory—called coffee. Then Biffen drew from the pocket of his venerable overcoat the volume of Euripides he had brought, and their talk turned once more to the land of the sun. Only when the coffee-shop was closed did they go forth again into the foggy street, and at the top of Pentonville Hill they stood for ten minutes debating a metrical effect in one of the Fragments.

Day after day Reardon went about with a fever upon him. By evening his pulse was always rapid, and no extremity of weariness brought him a refreshing sleep. In conversation he seemed either depressed or excited, more often the latter. Save when attending to his duties at the hospital, he made no pretence of employing himself; if at home, he sat for hours without opening a book, and his walks, excepting when they led him to Clipstone Street, were aimless.

The hours of postal delivery found him waiting in an anguish of suspense. At eight o'clock each morning he stood by his window, listening for the postman's knock in the street. As it approached he went out to the head of the stairs, and if the knock sounded at the door of his house, he leaned over the banisters, trembling in expectation. But the letter was never for him. When his agitation had subsided he felt glad of the disappointment, and laughed and sang.

One day Carter appeared at the City Road establishment, and made an opportunity of speaking to his clerk in private.

'I suppose,' he said with a smile, 'they'll have to look out for someone else at Croydon?'

'By no means! The thing is settled. I go at Christmas.'

'You really mean that?'

'Undoubtedly.'

Seeing that Reardon was not disposed even to allude to private circumstances the secretary said no more, and went away convinced that misfortunes had turned the poor fellow's brain.

Wandering in the city, about this time, Reardon encountered his friend the realist.

‘Would you like to meet Sykes?’ asked Biffen. ‘I am just going to see him.’

‘Where does he live?’

‘In some indiscoverable hole. To save fuel, he spends his mornings at some reading-rooms; the admission is only a penny, and there he can see all the papers and do his writing and enjoy a grateful temperature.’

They repaired to the haunt in question. A flight of stairs brought them to a small room in which were exposed the daily newspapers; another ascent, and they were in a room devoted to magazines, chess, and refreshments; yet another, and they reached the department of weekly publications; lastly, at the top of the house, they found a lavatory, and a chamber for the use of those who desired to write. The walls of this last retreat were of blue plaster and sloped inwards from the floor; along them stood school desks with benches, and in one place was suspended a ragged and dirty card announcing that paper and envelopes could be purchased downstairs. An enormous basket full of waste-paper, and a small stove, occupied two corners; ink blotches, satirical designs, and much scribbling in pen and pencil served for mural adornment. From the adjacent lavatory

came sounds of splashing and spluttering, and the busy street far below sent up its confused noises.

Two persons only sat at the desks. One was a hunger-bitten, out-of-work clerk, evidently engaged in replying to advertisements; in front of him lay two or three finished letters, and on the ground at his feet were several crumpled sheets of note-paper, representing abortive essays in composition. The other man, also occupied with the pen, looked about forty years old, and was clad in a very rusty suit of tweeds; on the bench beside him lay a grey overcoat and a silk hat which had for some time been moulting. His face declared the habit to which he was a victim, but it had nothing repulsive in its lineaments and expression; on the contrary, it was pleasing, amiable, and rather quaint. At this moment no one would have doubted his sobriety. With coat-sleeve turned back, so as to give free play to his right hand and wrist, revealing meanwhile a flannel shirt of singular colour, and with his collar unbuttoned (he wore no tie) to leave his throat at ease as he bent myopically over the paper, he was writing at express speed, evidently in the full rush of the ardour of composition. The veins of his fore-

head were dilated, and his chin pushed forward in a way that made one think of a racing horse.

‘Are you too busy to talk?’ asked Biffen, going to his side.

‘I am! Upon my soul I am!’ exclaimed the other looking up in alarm. ‘For the love of Heaven don’t put me out! A quarter of an hour!’

‘All right. I’ll come up again.’

The friends went downstairs and turned over the papers.

‘Now let’s try him again,’ said Biffen, when considerably more than the requested time had elapsed. They went up, and found Mr. Sykes in an attitude of melancholy meditation. He had turned back his coat sleeve, had buttoned his collar, and was eyeing the slips of completed manuscript. Biffen presented his companion, and Mr. Sykes greeted the novelist with much geniality.

‘What do you think this is?’ he exclaimed, pointing to his work. ‘The first instalment of my autobiography for the *Shropshire Weekly Herald*. Anonymous, of course, but strictly veracious, with the omission of sundry little personal failings which are nothing to the point. I call it “Through the Wilds of Literary London.”

An old friend of mine edits the *Herald*, and I'm indebted to him for the suggestion.'

His voice was a trifle husky, but he spoke like a man of education.

'Most people will take it for fiction. I wish I had inventive power enough to write fiction anything like it. I have published novels, Mr. Reardon, but my experience in that branch of literature was peculiar—as I may say it has been in most others to which I have applied myself. My first stories were written for *The Young Lady's Favourite*, and most remarkable productions they were, I promise you. That was fifteen years ago, in the days of my versatility. I could throw off my supplemental novelette of fifteen thousand words without turning a hair, and immediately after it fall to, fresh as a daisy, on the "Illustrated History of the United States," which I was then doing for Edward Coghlan. But presently I thought myself too good for the *Favourite*; in an evil day I began to write three-volume novels, aiming at reputation. It wouldn't do. I persevered for five years, and made about five failures. Then I went back to Bowring. "Take me on again, old man, will you?" Bowring was a man of few words; he said, "Blaze away, my boy." And I tried to. But it was no use;

I had got out of the style ; my writing was too literary by a long chalk. For a whole year I deliberately strove to write badly, but Bowring was so pained with the feebleness of my efforts that at last he sternly bade me avoid his sight. "What the devil," he roared one day, "do you mean by sending me stories about men and women? You ought to know better than that, a fellow of your experience!" So I had to give it up, and there was an end of my career as a writer of fiction.'

He shook his head sadly.

'Biffen,' he continued, 'when I first made his acquaintance, had an idea of writing for the working classes ; and what do you think he was going to offer them? Stories *about* the working classes! Nay, never hang your head for it, old boy ; it was excusable in the days of your youth. Why, Mr. Reardon, as no doubt you know well enough, nothing can induce working men or women to read stories that treat of their own world. They are the most consumed idealists in creation, especially the women. Again and again work-girls have said to me : "Oh, I don't like that book ; it's nothing but real life."'

'It's the fault of women in general,' remarked Reardon.

‘So it is, but it comes out with delicious *naïveté* in the working classes. Now, educated people like to read of scenes that are familiar to them, though I grant you that the picture must be idealised if you’re to appeal to more than one in a thousand. The working classes detest anything that tries to represent their daily life. It isn’t because that life is too painful ; no, no ; it’s downright snobbishness. Dickens goes down only with the best of them, and then solely because of his strength in farce and his melodrama.’

Presently the three went out together, and had dinner at an *à la mode* beef shop. Mr. Sykes ate little, but took copious libations of porter at twopence a pint. When the meal was over he grew taciturn.

‘Can you walk westwards?’ Biffen asked.

‘I’m afraid not, afraid not. In fact I have an appointment at two—at Aldgate station.’

They parted from him.

‘Now he’ll go and soak till he’s unconscious,’ said Biffen. ‘Poor fellow ! Pity he ever earns anything at all. The workhouse would be better, I should think.’

‘No, no ! Let a man drink himself to death rather. I have a horror of the workhouse.’

Remember the clock at Marylebone I used to tell you about.'

'Unphilosophic. I don't think I should be unhappy in the workhouse. I should have a certain satisfaction in the thought that I had forced society to support me. And then the absolute freedom from care! Why, it's very much the same as being a man of independent fortune.'

It was about a week after this, midway in November, that there at length came to Manville Street a letter addressed in Amy's hand. It arrived at three one afternoon; Reardon heard the postman, but he had ceased to rush out on every such occasion, and to-day he was feeling ill. Lying upon the bed, he had just raised his head wearily when he became aware that someone was mounting to his room. He sprang up, his face and neck flushing.

This time Amy began 'Dear Edwin'; the sight of those words made his brain swim.

'You must, of course, have heard [she wrote] that my uncle John has left me ten thousand pounds. It has not yet come into my possession, and I had decided that I would not write to

you till that happened, but perhaps you may altogether misunderstand my silence.

‘If this money had come to me when you were struggling so hard to earn a living for us, we should never have spoken the words and thought the thoughts which now make it so difficult for me to write to you. What I wish to say is that, although the property is legally my own, I quite recognise that you have a right to share in it. Since we have lived apart you have sent me far more than you could really afford, believing it your duty to do so ; now that things are so different I wish you, as well as myself, to benefit by the change.

‘I said at our last meeting that I should be quite prepared to return to you if you took that position at Croydon. There is now no need for you to pursue a kind of work for which you are quite unfitted, and I repeat that I am willing to live with you as before. If you will tell me where you would like to make a new home I shall gladly agree. I do not think you would care to leave London permanently, and certainly I should not.

‘Please to let me hear from you as soon as possible. In writing like this I feel that I have done what you expressed a wish that I

should do. I have asked you to put an end to our separation, and I trust that I have not asked in vain.

‘Yours always,

‘AMY REARDON.’

The letter fell from his hand. It was such a letter as he might have expected, but the beginning misled him, and as his agitation throbbed itself away he suffered an encroachment of despair which made him for a time unable to move or even think.

His reply, written by the dreary twilight which represented sunset, ran thus :

‘Dear Amy,—I thank you for your letter, and I appreciate your motive in writing it. But if you feel that you have “done what I expressed a wish that you should do,” you must have strangely misunderstood me.

‘The only one thing that I *wished* was, that by some miracle your love for me might be revived. Can I persuade myself that this is the letter of a wife who desires to return to me because in her heart she loves me? If that is the truth you have been most unfortunate in trying to express yourself.

‘You have written because it seemed your

duty to do so. But, indeed, a sense of duty such as this is a mistaken one. You have no love for me, and where there is no love there is no mutual obligation in marriage. Perhaps you think that regard for social conventions will necessitate your living with me again. But have more courage; refuse to act falsehoods; tell society it is base and brutal, and that you prefer to live an honest life.

‘I cannot share your wealth, dear. But as you have no longer need of my help—as we are now quite independent of each other—I shall cease to send the money which hitherto I have considered yours. In this way I shall have enough, and more than enough, for my necessities, so that you will never have to trouble yourself with the thought that I am suffering privations. At Christmas I go to Croydon, and I will then write to you again.

‘For we may at all events be friendly. My mind is relieved from ceaseless anxiety on your account. I know now that you are safe from that accursed poverty which is to blame for all our sufferings. You I do not blame, though I have sometimes done so. My own experience teaches me how kindness can be embittered by misfortune. Some great and noble sorrow may

have the effect of drawing hearts together, but to struggle against destitution, to be crushed by care about shillings and sixpences—that must always degrade.

‘No other reply than this is possible, so I beg you not to write in this way again. Let me know if you go to live elsewhere. I hope Willie is well, and that his growth is still a delight and happiness to you.

‘EDWIN REARDON.’

That one word ‘dear,’ occurring in the middle of the letter, gave him pause as he read the lines over. Should he not obliterate it, and even in such a way that Amy might see what he had done? His pen was dipped in the ink for that purpose, but after all he held his hand. Amy was still dear to him, say what he might, and if she noted the word—if she pondered over it——

A street gas-lamp prevented the room from becoming absolutely dark. When he had closed the envelope he lay down on his bed again, and watched the flickering yellowness upon the ceiling. He ought to have some tea before going to the hospital, but he cared so little for it that the trouble of boiling water was too

great. The flickering light grew fainter; he understood at length that this was caused by fog that had begun to descend. The fog was his enemy; it would be wise to purchase a respirator if this hideous weather continued, for sometimes his throat burned, and there was a rasping in his chest which gave disagreeable admonition.

He fell asleep for half an hour, and on awaking he was feverish, as usual at this time of day. Well, it was time to go to his work. Ugh! That first mouthful of fog!

CHAPTER XXVIII

INTERIM

THE rooms which Milvain had taken for himself and his sisters were modest, but more expensive than their old quarters. As the change was on his account he held himself responsible for the extra outlay. But for his immediate prospects this step would have been unwarrantable, as his earnings were only just sufficient for his needs on the previous footing. He had resolved that his marriage must take place before Christmas; till that event he would draw when necessary upon the girls' little store, and then repay them out of Marian's dowry.

‘And what are we to do when you are married?’ asked Dora.

The question was put on the first evening of their being all under the same roof. The trio had had supper in the girls' sitting-room, and it was a moment for frank conversation. Dora rejoiced in the coming marriage; her brother

had behaved honourably, and Marian, she trusted, would be very happy, notwithstanding disagreement with her father, which seemed inevitable. Maud was by no means so well pleased, though she endeavoured to wear smiles. It looked to her as if Jasper had been guilty of a kind of weakness not to be expected in him. Marian, as an individual, could not be considered an appropriate wife for such a man with such a future; and as for her five thousand pounds, that was ridiculous. Had it been ten—something can be made of ten thousand; but a paltry five! Maud's ideas on such subjects had notably expanded of late, and one of the results was that she did not live so harmoniously with her sister as for the first few months of their London career.

‘I have been thinking a good deal about that,’ replied Jasper to the younger girl's question. He stood with his back to the fire and smoked a cigarette. ‘I thought at first of taking a flat; but then a flat of the kind I should want would be twice the rent of a large house. If we have a house with plenty of room in it you might come and live with us after a time. At first I must find you decent lodgings in our neighbourhood.’

‘You show a good deal of generosity, Jasper,’ said Maud, ‘but pray remember that Marian isn’t bringing you five thousand a year.’

‘I regret to say that she isn’t. What she brings me is five hundred a year for ten years—that’s how I look at it. My own income will make it something between six or seven hundred at first, and before long probably more like a thousand. I am quite cool and collected. I understand exactly where I am, and where I am likely to be ten years hence. Marian’s money is to be spent in obtaining a position for myself. At present I am spoken of as a “smart young fellow,” and that kind of thing; but no one would offer me an editorship, or any other serious help. Wait till I show that I have helped myself, and hands will be stretched to me from every side. ’Tis the way of the world. I shall belong to a club; I shall give nice, quiet little dinners to selected people; I shall let it be understood by all and sundry that I have a social position. Thenceforth I am quite a different man, a man to be taken into account. And what will you bet me that I don’t stand in the foremost rank of literary reputabilities ten years hence?’

‘I doubt whether six or seven hundred a year will be enough for this.’

‘If not, I am prepared to spend a thousand. Bless my soul! As if two or three years wouldn’t suffice to draw out the mean qualities in the kind of people I am thinking of! I say ten, to leave myself a great margin.’

‘Marian approves this?’

‘I haven’t distinctly spoken of it. But she approves whatever I think good.’

The girls laughed at his way of pronouncing this.

‘And let us just suppose that you are so unfortunate as to fail?’

‘There’s no supposing it, unless, of course, I lose my health. I am not presuming on any wonderful development of powers. Such as I am now, I need only to be put on the little pedestal of a decent independence and plenty of people will point fingers of admiration at me. You don’t fully appreciate this. Mind, it wouldn’t do if I had no qualities. I *have* the qualities; they only need bringing into prominence. If I am an unknown man, and publish a wonderful book, it will make its way very slowly, or not at all. If I, become a known man, publish that very same book, its praise will echo over both hemispheres.

I should be within the truth if I had said "a vastly inferior book," but I am in a bland mood at present. Suppose poor Reardon's novels had been published in the full light of reputation instead of in the struggling dawn which was never to become day, wouldn't they have been magnified by every critic? *You have to become famous before you can secure the attention which would give fame.'*

He delivered this apophthegm with emphasis, and repeated it in another form.

'You have to obtain reputation before you can get a fair hearing for that which would justify your repute. It's the old story of the French publisher who said to Dumas: "Make a name, and I'll publish anything you write." "But how the *diable*," cries the author, "am I to make a name if I can't get published?" If a man can't hit upon any other way of attracting attention, let him dance on his head in the middle of the street; after that he may hope to get consideration for his volume of poems. I am speaking of men who wish to win reputation before they are toothless. Of course if your work is strong, and you can afford to wait, the probability is that half a dozen people will at last begin to shout that you have been monstrously neglected,

as you have. But that happens when you are hoary and sapless, and when nothing under the sun delights you.'

He lit a new cigarette.

'Now I, my dear girls, am not a man who can afford to wait. First of all, my qualities are not of the kind which demand the recognition of posterity. My writing is for to-day, most distinctly hodiernal. It has no value save in reference to to-day. The question is: How can I get the eyes of men fixed upon me? The answer: By pretending I am quite independent of their gaze. I shall succeed, without any kind of doubt; and then I'll have a medal struck to celebrate the day of my marriage.'

But Jasper was not quite so well assured of the prudence of what he was about to do as he wished his sisters to believe. The impulse to which he had finally yielded still kept its force; indeed, was stronger than ever since the intimacy of lovers' dialogue had revealed to him more of Marian's heart and mind. Undeniably he was in love. Not passionately, not with the consuming desire which makes every motive seem paltry compared with its own satisfaction; but still quite sufficiently in love to have a great difficulty in pursuing his daily tasks. This did

not still the voice which bade him remember all the opportunities and hopes he was throwing aside. Since the plighting of troth with Marian he had been over to Wimbledon, to the house of his friend and patron Mr. Horace Barlow, and there he had again met with Miss Rupert. This lady had no power whatever over his emotions, but he felt assured that she regarded him with strong interest. When he imagined the possibility of contracting a marriage with Miss Rupert, who would make him at once a man of solid means, his head drooped, and he wondered at his precipitation. It had to be confessed that he was the victim of a vulgar weakness. He had declared himself not of the first order of progressive men.

The conversation with Amy Reardon did not tend to put his mind at rest. Amy was astonished at so indiscreet a step in a man of his calibre. Ah ! if only Amy herself were free, with her ten thousand pounds to dispose of ! She, he felt sure, did not view him with indifference. Was there not a touch of pique in the elaborate irony with which she had spoken of his choice ?—But it was idle to look in that direction.

He was anxious on his sisters' account. They

were clever girls, and with energy might before long earn a bare subsistence; but it began to be doubtful whether they would persevere in literary work. Maud, it was clear, had conceived hopes of quite another kind. Her intimacy with Mrs. Lane was effecting a change in her habits, her dress, even her modes of speech. A few days after their establishment in the new lodgings, Jasper spoke seriously on this subject with the younger girl.

‘I wonder whether you could satisfy my curiosity in a certain matter,’ he said. ‘Do you, by chance, know how much Maud gave for that new jacket in which I saw her yesterday?’

Dora was reluctant to answer.

‘I don’t think it was very much.’

‘That is to say, it didn’t cost twenty guineas. Well, I hope not. I notice, too, that she has been purchasing a new hat.’

‘Oh, that was very inexpensive. She trimmed it herself.’

‘Did she? Is there any particular, any quite special, reason for this expenditure?’

‘I really can’t say, Jasper.’

‘That’s ambiguous, you know. Perhaps it means you won’t allow yourself to say?’

‘No, Maud doesn’t tell me about things of that kind.’

He took opportunities of investigating the matter, with the result that some ten days after he sought private colloquy with Maud herself. She had asked his opinion of a little paper she was going to send to a ladies’ illustrated weekly, and he summoned her to his own room.

‘I think this will do pretty well,’ he said. ‘There’s rather too much thought in it, perhaps. Suppose you knock out one or two of the less obvious reflections, and substitute a wholesome commonplace? You’ll have a better chance, I assure you.’

‘But I shall make it worthless.’

‘No; you’ll probably make it worth a guinea or so. You must remember that the people who read women’s papers are irritated, simply irritated, by anything that isn’t glaringly obvious. They hate an unusual thought. The art of writing for such papers—indeed, for the public in general—is to express vulgar thought and feeling in a way that flatters the vulgar thinkers and feelers. Just abandon your mind to it, and then let me see it again.’

Maud took up the manuscript and glanced over it with a contemptuous smile. Having

observed her for a moment, Jasper threw himself back in the chair and said, as if casually :

‘I am told that Mr. Dolomore is becoming a great friend of yours.’

The girl’s face changed. She drew herself up, and looked away towards the window.

‘I don’t know that he is a “great” friend.’

‘Still, he pays enough attention to you to excite remark.’

‘Whose remark?’

‘That of several people who go to Mrs. Lane’s.’

‘I don’t know any reason for it,’ said Maud, coldly.

‘Look here, Maud, you don’t mind if I give you a friendly warning?’

She kept silence, with a look of superiority to all monition.

‘Dolomore,’ pursued her brother, ‘is all very well in his way, but that way isn’t yours. I believe he has a good deal of money, but he has neither brains nor principle. There’s no harm in your observing the nature and habits of such individuals, but don’t allow yourself to forget that they are altogether beneath you.’

‘There’s no need whatever for you to teach me self-respect,’ replied the girl.

‘I’m quite sure of that; but you are inexperienced. On the whole, I do rather wish that you would go less frequently to Mrs. Lane’s. It was rather an unfortunate choice of yours. Very much better if you could have got on a good footing with the Barnabys. If you are generally looked upon as belonging to the Lanes’ set it will make it difficult for you to get in with the better people.’

Maud was not to be drawn into argument, and Jasper could only hope that his words would have some weight with her. The Mr. Dolomore in question was a young man of rather offensive type—athletic, dandiacal, and half-educated. It astonished Jasper that his sister could tolerate such an empty creature for a moment; who has not felt the like surprise with regard to women’s inclinations? He talked with Dora about it, but she was not in her sister’s confidence.

‘I think you ought to have some influence with her,’ Jasper said.

‘Maud won’t allow anyone to interfere in—her private affairs.’

‘It would be unfortunate if she made me quarrel with her.’

‘Oh, surely there isn’t any danger of that?’

‘I don’t know, she mustn’t be obstinate.’

Jasper himself saw a good deal of miscellaneous society at this time. He could not work so persistently as usual, and with wise tactics he used the seasons of enforced leisure to extend his acquaintance. Marian and he were together twice a week, in the evening.

Of his old Bohemian associates he kept up intimate relations with one only, and that was Whelpdale. This was in a measure obligatory, for Whelpdale frequently came to see him, and it would have been difficult to repel a man who was always making known how highly he esteemed the privilege of Milvain’s friendship, and whose company on the whole was agreeable enough. At the present juncture Whelpdale’s cheery flattery was a distinct assistance; it helped to support Jasper in his self-confidence, and to keep the brightest complexion on the prospect to which he had committed himself.

‘Whelpdale is anxious to make Marian’s acquaintance,’ Jasper said to his sisters one day. ‘Shall we have him here to-morrow evening?’

‘Just as you like,’ Maud replied.

‘You won’t object, Dora?’

‘Oh no! I rather like Mr. Whelpdale.’

‘If I were to repeat that to him he’d go wild with delight. But don’t be afraid ; I shan’t. I’ll ask him to come for an hour, and trust to his discretion not to bore us by staying too long.’

A note was posted to Whelpdale ; he was invited to present himself at eight o’clock, by which time Marian would have arrived. Jasper’s room was to be the scene of the assembly, and punctual to the minute the literary adviser appeared. He was dressed with all the finish his wardrobe allowed, and his face beamed with gratification ; it was rapture to him to enter the presence of these three girls, one of whom he had, *more suo*, held in romantic remembrance since his one meeting with her at Jasper’s old lodgings. His eyes melted with tenderness as he approached Dora and saw her smile of gracious recognition. By Maud he was profoundly impressed. Marian inspired him with no awe, but he fully appreciated the charm of her features and her modest gravity. After all, it was to Dora that his eyes turned again most naturally. He thought her exquisite, and, rather than be long without a glimpse of her, he contented himself with fixing his eyes on the hem of her dress and the boot-toe that occasionally peeped from beneath it.

As was to be expected in such a circle, conversation soon turned to the subject of literary struggles.

‘I always feel it rather humiliating,’ said Jasper, ‘that I have gone through no very serious hardships. It must be so gratifying to say to young fellows who are just beginning: “Ah, I remember when I was within an ace of starving to death,” and then come out with Grub Street reminiscences of the most appalling kind. Unfortunately, I have always had enough to eat.’

‘I haven’t,’ exclaimed Whelpdale. ‘I have lived for five days on a few cents’ worth of pea-nuts in the States.’

‘What are pea-nuts, Mr. Whelpdale?’ asked Dora.

Delighted with the question, Whelpdale described that undesirable species of food.

‘It was in Troy,’ he went on, ‘Troy, N.Y. To think that a man should live on peanuts in a town called Troy!’

‘Tell us those adventures,’ cried Jasper. ‘It’s a long time since I heard them, and the girls will enjoy it vastly.’

Dora looked at him with such good-humoured interest that the traveller needed no further persuasion.

‘It came to pass in those days,’ he began, ‘that I inherited from my godfather a small, a very small, sum of money. I was making strenuous efforts to write for magazines, with absolutely no encouragement. As everybody was talking just then of the Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia, I conceived the brilliant idea of crossing the Atlantic, in the hope that I might find valuable literary material at the Exhibition—or Exposition, as they called it—and elsewhere. I won’t trouble you with an account of how I lived whilst I still had money; sufficient that no one would accept the articles I sent to England, and that at last I got into perilous straits. I went to New York, and thought of returning home, but the spirit of adventure was strong in me. “I’ll go West,” I said to myself. “There I am bound to find material.” And go I did, taking an emigrant ticket to Chicago. It was December, and I should like you to imagine what a journey of a thousand miles by an emigrant train meant at that season. The cars were deadly cold, and what with that and the hardness of the seats I found it impossible to sleep; it reminded me of tortures I had read about; I thought my brain would have burst with the need of sleeping. At

Cleveland, in Ohio, we had to wait several hours in the night; I left the station and wandered about till I found myself on the edge of a great cliff that looked over Lake Erie. A magnificent picture! Brilliant moonlight, and all the lake away to the horizon frozen and covered with snow. The clocks struck two as I stood there.'

He was interrupted by the entrance of a servant who brought coffee.

'Nothing could be more welcome,' cried Dora. 'Mr. Whelpdale makes one feel quite chilly.'

There was laughter and chatting whilst Maud poured out the beverage. Then Whelpdale pursued his narrative.

'I reached Chicago with not quite five dollars in my pockets, and, with a courage which I now marvel at, I paid immediately four dollars and a half for a week's board and lodging. "Well," I said to myself, "for a week I am safe. If I earn nothing in that time, at least I shall owe nothing when I have to turn out into the streets." It was a rather dirty little boarding-house, in Wabash Avenue, and occupied, as I soon found, almost entirely by actors. There was no fireplace in my bedroom, and if there had been I couldn't have afforded a fire. But that mattered little; what I had to do

was to set forth and discover some way of making money. Don't suppose that I was in a desperate state of mind ; how it was, I don't quite know, but I felt decidedly cheerful. It was pleasant to be in this new region of the earth, and I went about the town like a tourist who has abundant resources.'

He sipped his coffee.

'I saw nothing for it but to apply at the office of some newspaper, and as I happened to light upon the biggest of them first of all, I put on a bold face, marched in, asked if I could see the editor. There was no difficulty whatever about this ; I was told to ascend by means of the "elevator" to an upper storey, and there I walked into a comfortable little room where a youngish man sat smoking a cigar at a table covered with print and manuscript. I introduced myself, stated my business. "Can you give me work of any kind on your paper?" "Well, what experience have you had?" "None whatever." The editor smiled. "I'm very much afraid you would be no use to us. But what do you think you could do?" Well now, there was but one thing that by any possibility I could do. I asked him : "Do you publish any fiction—short stories?" "Yes, we're always glad of a short

story, if it's good." This was a big daily paper ; they have weekly supplements of all conceivable kinds of matter. "Well," I said, "if I write a story of English life, will you consider it?" "With pleasure." I left him, and went out as if my existence were henceforth provided for.'

He laughed heartily, and was joined by his hearers.

'It was a great thing to be permitted to write a story, but then—*what* story? I went down to the shore of Lake Michigan; walked there for half an hour in an icy wind. Then I looked for a stationer's shop, and laid out a few of my remaining cents in the purchase of pen, ink, and paper—my stock of all these things was at an end when I left New York. Then back to the boarding-house. Impossible to write in my bedroom, the temperature was below zero; there was no choice but to sit down in the common room, a place like the smoke-room of a poor commercial hotel in England. A dozen men were gathered about the fire, smoking, talking, quarrelling. Favourable conditions, you see, for literary effort. But the story had to be written, and write it I did, sitting there at the end of a deal table; I finished it in less than a couple of days, a good long story, enough to

fill three columns of the huge paper. I stand amazed at my power of concentration as often as I think of it !'

'And was it accepted ?' asked Dora.

'You shall hear. I took my manuscript to the editor, and he told me to come and see him again next morning. I didn't forget the appointment. As I entered he smiled in a very promising way, and said, "I think your story will do. I'll put it into the Saturday supplement. Call on Saturday morning and I'll remunerate you." How well I remember that word "remunerate"! I have had an affection for the word ever since. And remunerate me he did; scribbled something on a scrap of paper, which I presented to the cashier. The sum was eighteen dollars. Behold me saved!'

He sipped his coffee again.

'I have never come across an English editor who treated me with anything like that consideration and general kindness. How the man had time, in his position, to see me so often, and do things in such a human way, I can't understand. Imagine anyone trying the same at the office of a London newspaper! To begin with, one couldn't see the editor at all. I shall always think with profound gratitude of that

man with the peaked brown beard and pleasant smile.'

'But did the pea-nuts come after that? inquired Dora.

'Alas! they did. For some months I supported myself in Chicago, writing for that same paper, and for others. But at length the flow of my inspiration was checked; I had written myself out. And I began to grow home-sick, wanted to get back to England. The result was that I found myself one day in New York again, but without money enough to pay for a passage home. I tried to write one more story. But it happened, as I was looking over newspapers in a reading-room, that I saw one of my Chicago tales copied into a paper published at Troy. Now Troy was not very far off, and it occurred to me that, if I went there, the editor of this paper might be disposed to employ me, seeing he had a taste for my fiction. And I went, up the Hudson by steamboat. On landing at Troy I was as badly off as when I reached Chicago; I had less than a dollar. And the worst of it was I had come on a vain errand; the editor treated me with scant courtesy, and no work was to be got. I took a little room, paying for it day by day, and in the meantime I fed on those loathsome

pea-nuts, buying a handful in the street now and then. And I assure you I looked starvation in the face.'

'What sort of a town is Troy?' asked Marian, speaking for the first time.

'Don't ask me. They make straw-hats there principally, and they sell pea-nuts. More I remember not.'

'But you *didn't* starve to death,' said Maud.

'No, I just didn't. I went one afternoon into a lawyer's office, thinking I might get some copying work, and there I found an odd-looking old man, sitting with an open Bible on his knees. He explained to me that he wasn't the lawyer; that the lawyer was away on business, and that he was just guarding the office. Well, could he help me? He meditated, and a thought occurred to him. "Go," he said, "to such and such a boarding-house, and ask for Mr. Freeman Sterling. He is just starting on a business tour, and wants a young man to accompany him." I didn't dream of asking what the business was, but sped, as fast as my trembling limbs would carry me, to the address he had mentioned. I asked for Mr. Freeman Sterling, and found him. He was a photographer, and his business at present was to go about getting orders for the

reproducing of old portraits. A good-natured young fellow. He said he liked the look of me, and on the spot engaged me to assist him in a house-to-house visitation. He would pay for my board and lodging, and give me a commission on all the orders I obtained. Forthwith I sat down to a "square meal," and ate—my conscience, how I ate!'

'You were not eminently successful in that pursuit, I think?' said Jasper.

'I don't think I got half a dozen orders. Yet that good Samaritan supported me for five or six weeks, whilst we travelled from Troy to Boston. It couldn't go on; I was ashamed of myself; at last I told him that we must part. Upon my word, I believe he would have paid my expenses for another month; why, I can't understand. But he had a vast respect for me because I had written in newspapers, and I do seriously think that he didn't like to tell me I was a useless fellow. We parted on the very best of terms in Boston.'

'And you again had recourse to pea-nuts?' asked Dora.

'Well, no. In the meantime I had written to someone in England, begging the loan of just enough money to enable me to get home. The

money came a day after I had seen Sterling off by train.'

An hour and a half quickly passed, and Jasper, who wished to have a few minutes of Marian's company before it was time for her to go, cast a significant glance at his sisters. Dora said innocently :

'You wished me to tell you when it was half-past nine, Marian.'

And Marian rose. This was a signal Whelpdale could not disregard. Immediately he made ready for his own departure, and in less than five minutes was gone, his face at the last moment expressing blended delight and pain.

'Too good of you to have asked me to come,' he said with gratitude to Jasper, who went to the door with him. 'You are a happy man, by Jove! A happy man!'

When Jasper returned to the room his sisters had vanished. Marian stood by the fire. He drew near to her, took her hands, and repeated laughingly Whelpdale's last words.

'Is it true?' she asked.

'Tolerably true, I think.'

'Then I am as happy as you are.'

He released her hands, and moved a little apart.

‘Marian, I have been thinking about that letter to your father. I had better get it written, don’t you think?’

She gazed at him with troubled eyes.

‘Perhaps you had. Though we said it might be delayed until——’

‘Yes, I know. But I suspect you had rather I didn’t wait any longer. Isn’t that the truth?’

‘Partly. Do just as you wish, Jasper.’

‘I’ll go and see him, if you like.’

‘I am so afraid—— No, writing will be better.’

‘Very well. Then he shall have the letter to-morrow afternoon.’

‘Don’t let it come before the last post. I had so much rather not. Manage it, if you can.’

‘Very well. Now go and say good-night to the girls. It’s a vile night, and you must get home as soon as possible.’

She turned away, but again came towards him, murmuring :

‘Just a word or two more.’

‘About the letter?’

‘No. You haven’t said——’

He laughed.

‘And you couldn’t go away contentedly

unless I repeated for the hundredth time that I love you ?’

Marian searched his countenance.

‘Do you think it foolish? I live only on those words.’

‘Well, they are better than pea-nuts.’

‘Oh don’t! I can’t bear to——’

Jasper was unable to understand that such a jest sounded to her like profanity. She hid her face against him, and whispered the words that would have enraptured her had they but come from his lips. The young man found it pleasant enough to be worshipped, but he could not reply as she desired. A few phrases of tenderness, and his love-vocabulary was exhausted; he even grew weary when something more—the indefinite something—was vaguely required of him.

‘You are a dear, good, tender-hearted girl,’ he said, stroking her short, soft hair, which was exquisite to the hand. ‘Now go and get ready.’

She left him, but stood for a few moments on the landing before going to the girls’ room.

CHAPTER XXIX

CATASTROPHE

MARIAN had finished the rough draft of a paper on James Harrington, author of 'Oceana.' Her father went through it by the midnight lamp, and the next morning made his comments. A black sky and sooty rain strengthened his inclination to sit by the study fire and talk at large in a tone of flattering benignity.

'Those paragraphs on the Rota Club strike me as singularly happy,' he said, tapping the manuscript with the mouthpiece of his pipe. 'Perhaps you might say a word or two more about Cyriac Skinner; one mustn't be too allusive with general readers, their ignorance is incredible. But there is so little to add to this paper—so little to alter—that I couldn't feel justified in sending it as my own work. I think it is altogether too good to appear anonymously. You must sign it, Marian, and have the credit that is due to you.'

‘Oh, do you think it’s worth while?’ answered the girl, who was far from easy under this praise. Of late there had been too much of it; it made her regard her father with suspicions which increased her sense of trouble in keeping a momentous secret from him.

‘Yes, yes; you had better sign it. I’ll undertake there’s no other girl of your age who could turn out such a piece of work. I think we may fairly say that your apprenticeship is at an end. Before long,’ he smiled anxiously, ‘I may be counting upon you as a valued contributor. And that reminds me; would you be disposed to call with me on the Jedwoods at their house next Sunday?’

Marian understood the intention that lay beneath this proposal. She saw that her father would not allow himself to seem discouraged by the silence she maintained on the great subject which awaited her decision. He was endeavouring gradually to involve her in his ambitions, to carry her forward by insensible steps. It pained her to observe the suppressed eagerness with which he looked for her reply.

‘I will go if you wish, father, but I had rather not.’

‘I feel sure you would like Mrs. Jedwood.

One has no great opinion of her novels, but she is a woman of some intellect. Let me book you for next Sunday; surely I have a claim to your companionship now and then.'

Marian kept silence. Yule puffed at his pipe, then said with a speculative air:

'I suppose it has never even occurred to you to try your hand at fiction?'

'I haven't the least inclination that way.'

'You would probably do something rather good if you tried. But I don't urge it. My own efforts in that line were a mistake, I'm disposed to think. Not that the things were worse than multitudes of books which nowadays go down with the many-headed. But I never quite knew what I wished to be at in fiction. I wasn't content to write a mere narrative of the exciting kind, yet I couldn't hit upon subjects of intellectual cast that altogether satisfied me. Well, well; I have tried my hand at most kinds of literature. Assuredly I merit the title of man of letters.'

'You certainly do.'

'By-the-by, what should you think of that title for a review—*Letters*? It has never been used, so far as I know. I like the word "letters." How much better "a man of letters"

than "a literary man"! And apropos of that, when was the word "literature" first used in our modern sense to signify a body of writing? In Johnson's day it was pretty much the equivalent of our "culture." You remember his saying, "It is surprising how little literature people have." His dictionary, I believe, defines the word as "learning, skill in letters"—nothing else.'

It was characteristic of Yule to dwell with gusto on little points such as this; he prosed for a quarter of an hour, with a pause every now and then whilst he kept his pipe alight.

'I think *Letters* wouldn't be amiss,' he said at length, returning to the suggestion which he wished to keep before Marian's mind. 'It would clearly indicate our scope. No articles on bimetallism, as Quarmby said — wasn't it Quarmby?'

He laughed idly.

'Yes, I must ask Jedwood how he likes the name.'

Though Marian feared the result, she was glad when Jasper made up his mind to write to her father. Since it was determined that her money could not be devoted to establishing a review, the truth ought to be confessed before

Yule had gone too far in nursing his dangerous hope. Without the support of her love and all the prospects connected with it, she would hardly have been capable of giving a distinct refusal when her reply could no longer be postponed ; to hold the money merely for her own benefit would have seemed to her too selfish, however slight her faith in the project on which her father built so exultantly. When it was declared that she had accepted an offer of marriage, a sacrifice of that kind could no longer be expected of her. Opposition must direct itself against the choice she had made. It would be stern, perhaps relentless ; but she felt able to face any extremity of wrath. Her nerves quivered, but in her heart was an exhaustless source of courage.

That a change had somehow come about in the girl Yule was aware. He observed her with the closest study day after day. Her health seemed to have improved ; after a long spell of work she had not the air of despondent weariness which had sometimes irritated him, sometimes made him uneasy. She was more womanly in her bearing and speech, and exercised an independence, appropriate indeed to her years, but such as had not formerly declared

itself. The question with her father was whether these things resulted simply from her consciousness of possessing what to her seemed wealth, or something else had happened of the nature that he dreaded. An alarming symptom was the increased attention she paid to her personal appearance; its indications were not at all prominent, but Yule, on the watch for such things, did not overlook them. True, this also might mean nothing but a sense of relief from narrow means; a girl would naturally adorn herself a little under the circumstances.

His doubts came to an end two days after that proposal of a title for the new review. As he sat in his study the servant brought him a letter delivered by the last evening post. The handwriting was unknown to him; the contents were these:

‘DEAR MR. YULE,—It is my desire to write to you with perfect frankness and as simply as I can on a subject which has the deepest interest for me, and which I trust you will consider in that spirit of kindness with which you received me when we first met at Finden.

‘On the occasion of that meeting I had the happiness of being presented to Miss Yule. She

was not totally a stranger to me ; at that time I used to work pretty regularly in the Museum Reading-room, and there I had seen Miss Yule, had ventured to observe her at moments with a young man's attention, and had felt my interest aroused, though I did not know her name. To find her at Finden seemed to me a very unusual and delightful piece of good fortune. When I came back from my holiday I was conscious of a new purpose in life, a new desire and a new motive to help me on in my chosen career.

‘ My mother's death led to my sisters' coming to live in London. Already there had been friendly correspondence between Miss Yule and the two girls, and now that the opportunity offered they began to see each other frequently. As I was often at my sisters' lodgings it came about that I met Miss Yule there from time to time. In this way was confirmed my attachment to your daughter. The better I knew her, the more worthy I found her of reverence and love.

‘ Would it not have been natural for me to seek a renewal of the acquaintance with yourself which had been begun in the country ? Gladly I should have done so. Before my sisters' coming to London I did call one day at your house with

the desire of seeing you, but unfortunately you were not at home. Very soon after that I learnt to my extreme regret that my connection with *The Current* and its editor would make any repetition of my visit very distasteful to you. I was conscious of nothing in my literary life that could justly offend you—and at this day I can say the same—but I shrank from the appearance of importunity, and for some months I was deeply distressed by the fear that what I most desired in life had become unattainable. My means were very slight; I had no choice but to take such work as offered, and mere chance had put me into a position which threatened ruin to the hope that you would some day regard me as a not unworthy suitor for your daughter's hand.

‘Circumstances have led me to a step which at that time seemed impossible. Having discovered that Miss Yule returned the feeling I entertained for her, I have asked her to be my wife, and she has consented. It is now my hope that you will permit me to call upon you. Miss Yule is aware that I am writing this letter; will you not let her plead for me, seeing that only by an unhappy chance have I been kept aloof from you? Marian and I are equally desirous that you should approve our union; without that

approval, indeed, something will be lacking to the happiness for which we hope.

‘Believe me to be sincerely yours,
‘JASPER MILVAIN.’

Half an hour after reading this Yule was roused from a fit of the gloomiest brooding by Marian's entrance. She came towards him timidly, with pale countenance. He had glanced round to see who it was, but at once turned his head again.

‘Will you forgive me for keeping this secret from you, father?’

‘Forgive you?’ he replied in a hard, deliberate voice. ‘I assure you it is a matter of perfect indifference to me. You are long since of age, and I have no power whatever to prevent your falling a victim to any schemer who takes your fancy. It would be folly in me to discuss the question. I recognise your right to have as many secrets as may seem good to you. To talk of forgiveness is the merest affectation.’

‘No, I spoke sincerely. If it had seemed possible I should gladly have let you know about this from the first. That would have been natural and right. But you know what prevented me.’

‘I do. I will try to hope that even a sense of shame had something to do with it.’

‘That had nothing to do with it,’ said Marian, coldly. ‘I have never had reason to feel ashamed.’

‘Be it so. I trust you may never have reason to feel repentance. May I ask when you propose to be married?’

‘I don’t know when it will take place.’

‘As soon, I suppose, as your uncle’s executors have discharged a piece of business which is distinctly germane to the matter?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Does your mother know?’

‘I have just told her.’

‘Very well, then it seems to me that there’s nothing more to be said.’

‘Do you refuse to see Mr. Milvain?’

‘Most decidedly I do. You will have the goodness to inform him that that is my reply to his letter.’

‘I don’t think that is the behaviour of a gentleman,’ said Marian, her eyes beginning to gleam with resentment.

‘I am obliged to you for your instruction.’

‘Will you tell me, father, in plain words, why you dislike Mr. Milvain?’

‘I am not inclined to repeat what I have already fruitlessly told you. For the sake of a clear understanding, however, I will let you know the practical result of my dislike. From the day of your marriage with that man you are nothing to me. I shall distinctly forbid you to enter my house. You make your choice, and go your own way. I shall hope never to see your face again.’

Their eyes met, and the look of each seemed to fascinate the other.

‘If you have made up your mind to that,’ said Marian in a shaking voice, ‘I can remain here no longer. Such words are senselessly cruel. To-morrow I shall leave the house.’

‘I repeat that you are of age, and perfectly independent. It can be nothing to me how soon you go. You have given proof that I am of less than no account to you, and doubtless the sooner we cease to afflict each other the better.’

It seemed as if the effect of these conflicts with her father were to develop in Marian a vehemence of temper which at length matched that of which Yule was the victim. Her face, outlined to express a gentle gravity, was now haughtily passionate; nostrils and lips thrilled

with wrath, and her eyes were magnificent in their dark fieriness.

‘You shall not need to tell me that again,’ she answered, and immediately left him.

She went into the sitting-room, where Mrs. Yule was awaiting the result of the interview.

‘Mother,’ she said, with stern gentleness, ‘this house can no longer be a home for me. I shall go away to-morrow, and live in lodgings until the time of my marriage.’

Mrs. Yule uttered a cry of pain, and started up.

‘Oh, don’t do that, Marian! What has he said to you? Come and talk to me, darling—tell me what he’s said—don’t look like that!’

She clung to the girl despairingly, terrified by a transformation she would have thought impossible.

‘He says that if I marry Mr. Milvain he hopes never to see my face again. I can’t stay here. You shall come and see me, and we will be the same to each other as always. But father has treated me too unjustly. I can’t live near him after this.’

‘He doesn’t mean it,’ sobbed her mother. ‘He says what he’s sorry for as soon as the

words are spoken. He loves you too much, my darling, to drive you away like that. It's his disappointment, Marian; that's all it is. He counted on it so much. I've heard him talk of it in his sleep; he made so sure that he was going to have that new magazine, and the disappointment makes him that he doesn't know what he's saying. Only wait and see; he'll tell you he didn't mean it, I know he will. Only leave him alone till he's had time to get over it. Do forgive him this once.'

'It's like a madman to talk in that way,' said the girl, releasing herself. 'Whatever his disappointment, I can't endure it. I have worked hard for him, very hard, ever since I was old enough, and he owes me some kindness, some respect. It would be different if he had the least reason for his hatred of Jasper. It is nothing but insensate prejudice, the result of his quarrels with other people. What right has he to insult me by representing my future husband as a scheming hypocrite?'

'My love, he has had so much to bear—it's made him so quick-tempered.'

'Then I am quick-tempered too, and the sooner we are apart the better, as he said himself.'

‘Oh, but you have always been such a patient girl.’

‘My patience is at an end when I am treated as if I had neither rights nor feelings. However wrong the choice I had made, this was not the way to behave to me. His disappointment? Is there a natural law, then, that a daughter must be sacrificed to her father? My husband will have as much need of that money as my father has, and he will be able to make far better use of it. It was wrong even to ask me to give my money away like that. I have a right to happiness, as well as other women.’

She was shaken with hysterical passion, the natural consequence of this outbreak in a nature such as hers. Her mother, in the meantime, grew stronger by force of profound love that at length had found its opportunity of expression. Presently she persuaded Marian to come upstairs with her, and before long the overburdened breast was relieved by a flow of tears. But Marian’s purpose remained unshaken.

‘It is impossible for us to see each other day after day,’ she said when calmer. ‘He can’t control his anger against me, and I suffer too much when I am made to feel like this. I shall

take a lodging not far off, where you can see me often.'

'But you have no money, Marian,' replied Mrs. Yule, miserably.

'No money? As if I couldn't borrow a few pounds until all my own comes to me! Dora Milvain can lend me all I shall want; it won't make the least difference to her. I must have my money very soon now.'

At about half-past eleven Mrs. Yule went downstairs, and entered the study.

'If you are coming to speak about Marian,' said her husband, turning upon her with savage eyes, 'you can save your breath. I won't hear her name mentioned.'

She faltered, but overcame her weakness.

'You are driving her away from us, Alfred. It isn't right! Oh, it isn't right!'

'If she didn't go I should, so understand that! And if I go, you have seen the last of me. Make your choice, make your choice!'

He had yielded himself to that perverse frenzy which impels a man to acts and utterances most wildly at conflict with reason. His sense of the monstrous irrationality to which he was committed completed what was begun in him by the bitterness of a great frustration.

‘If I wasn’t a poor, helpless woman,’ replied his wife, sinking upon a chair and crying without raising her hands to her face, ‘I’d go and live with her till she was married, and then make a home for myself. But I haven’t a penny, and I’m too old to earn my own living; I should only be a burden to her.’

‘That shall be no hindrance,’ cried Yule. ‘Go, by all means; you shall have a sufficient allowance as long as I can continue to work, and when I’m past that, your lot will be no harder than mine. Your daughter had the chance of making provision for my old age, at no expense to herself. But that was asking too much of her. Go, by all means, and leave me to make what I can of the rest of my life; perhaps I may save a few years still from the curse brought upon me by my own folly.’

It was idle to address him. Mrs. Yule went into the sitting-room, and there sat weeping for an hour. Then she extinguished the lights, and crept upstairs in silence.

Yule passed the night in the study. Towards morning he slept for an hour or two, just long enough to let the fire go out and to get thoroughly chilled. When he opened his eyes a muddy twilight had begun to show at the

window ; the sounds of a clapping door within the house, which had probably awakened him, made him aware that the servant was already up.

He drew up the blind. There seemed to be a frost, for the moisture of last night had all disappeared, and the yard upon which the window looked was unusually clean. With a glance at the black grate he extinguished his lamp, and went out into the passage. A few minutes' groping for his overcoat and hat, and he left the house.

His purpose was to warm himself with a vigorous walk, and at the same time to shake off, if possible, the nightmare of his rage and hopelessness. He had no distinct feeling with regard to his behaviour of the past evening ; he neither justified nor condemned himself ; he did not ask himself whether Marian would to-day leave her home, or if her mother would take him at his word and also depart. These seemed to be details which his brain was too weary to consider. But he wished to be away from the wretchedness of his house, and to let things go as they would whilst he was absent. As he closed the front door he felt as if he were escaping from an atmosphere that threatened to stifle him.

His steps directing themselves more by habit

than with any deliberate choice, he walked towards Camden Road. When he had reached Camden Town railway-station he was attracted by a coffee-stall ; a draught of the steaming liquid, no matter its quality, would help his blood to circulate. He laid down his penny, and first warmed his hands by holding them round the cup. Whilst standing thus he noticed that the objects at which he looked had a blurred appearance ; his eyesight seemed to have become worse this morning. Only a result of his insufficient sleep perhaps. He took up a scrap of newspaper that lay on the stall ; he could read it, but one of his eyes was certainly weaker than the other ; trying to see with that one alone, he found that everything became misty.

He laughed, as if the threat of new calamity were an amusement in his present state of mind. And at the same moment his look encountered that of a man who had drawn near to him, a shabbily-dressed man of middle age, whose face did not correspond with his attire.

‘ Will you give me a cup of coffee ? ’ asked the stranger, in a low voice and with shame-faced manner. ‘ It would be a great kindness.’

The accent was that of good breeding. Yule hesitated in surprise for a moment, then said :

‘Have one by all means. Would you care for anything to eat?’

‘I am much obliged to you. I think I should be none the worse for one of those solid slices of bread and butter.’

The stall-keeper was just extinguishing his lights; the frosty sky showed a pale gleam of sunrise.

‘Hard times, I’m afraid,’ remarked Yule, as his beneficiary began to eat the hunccheon with much appearance of grateful appetite.

‘Very hard times.’ He had a small, thin, colourless countenance, with large, pathetic eyes; a slight moustache and curly beard. His clothes were such as would be worn by some very poor clerk. ‘I came here an hour ago,’ he continued, ‘with the hope of meeting an acquaintance who generally goes from this station at a certain time. I have missed him, and in doing so I missed what I had thought my one chance of a breakfast. When one has neither dined nor supped on the previous day, breakfast becomes a meal of some importance.’

‘True. Take another slice.’

‘I am greatly obliged to you.’

‘Not at all. I have known hard times myself, and am likely to know worse.’

‘I trust not.—This is the first time that I have positively begged. I should have been too much ashamed to beg of the kind of men who are usually at these places ; they certainly have no money to spare. I was thinking of making an appeal at a baker’s shop, but it is very likely I should have been handed over to a policeman. Indeed I don’t know what I should have done ; the last point of endurance was almost reached. I have no clothes but these I wear, and they are few enough for the season. Still, I suppose the waistcoat must have gone.’

He did not talk like a beggar who is trying to excite compassion, but with a sort of detached curiosity concerning the difficulties of his position.

‘You can find nothing to do?’ said the man of letters.

‘Positively nothing. By profession I am a surgeon, but it’s a long time since I practised. Fifteen years ago I was comfortably established at Wakefield ; I was married and had one child. But my capital ran out, and my practice, never anything to boast of, fell to nothing. I succeeded in getting a place as an assistant to a man at Chester. We sold up, and started on the journey.’

He paused, looking at Yule in a strange way.

‘What happened then?’

‘You probably don’t remember a railway accident that took place near Crewe in that year—it was 1869? I and my wife and child were alone in a carriage that was splintered. One moment I was talking with them, in fairly good spirits, and my wife was laughing at something I had said; the next, there were two crushed, bleeding bodies at my feet. I had a broken arm, that was all. Well, they were killed on the instant; they didn’t suffer. That has been my one consolation.’

Yule kept the silence of sympathy.

‘I was in a lunatic asylum for more than a year after that,’ continued the man. ‘Unhappily, I didn’t lose my senses at the moment; it took two or three weeks to bring me to that pass. But I recovered, and there has been no return of the disease. Don’t suppose that I am still of unsound mind. There can be little doubt that poverty will bring me to that again in the end; but as yet I am perfectly sane. I have supported myself in various ways. No, I don’t drink; I see the question in your face. But I am physically weak, and, to quote Mrs. Gummidge, “things

go contrary with me." There's no use lamenting ; this breakfast has helped me on, and I feel in much better spirits.'

'Your surgical knowledge is no use to you?'

The other shook his head and sighed.

'Did you ever give any special attention to diseases of the eyes?'

'Special, no. But of course I had some acquaintance with the subject.'

'Could you tell by examination whether a man was threatened with cataract, or anything of that kind?'

'I think I could.'

'I am speaking of myself.'

The stranger made a close scrutiny of Yule's face, and asked certain questions with reference to his visual sensations.

'I hardly like to propose it,' he said at length, 'but if you were willing to accompany me to a very poor room that I have not far from here, I could make the examination formally.'

'I will go with you.'

They turned away from the stall, and the ex-surgeon led into a by-street. Yule wondered at himself for caring to seek such a singular consultation, but he had a pressing desire to hear some opinion as to the state of his eyes. Whatever

the stranger might tell him, he would afterwards have recourse to a man of recognised standing ; but just now companionship of any kind was welcome, and the poor hungry fellow, with his dolorous life-story, had made appeal to his sympathies. To give money under guise of a fee would be better than merely offering alms.

‘This is the house,’ said his guide, pausing at a dirty door. ‘It isn’t inviting, but the people are honest, so far as I know. My room is at the top.’

‘Lead on,’ answered Yule.

In the room they entered was nothing noticeable ; it was only the poorest possible kind of bed-chamber, or all but the poorest possible. Daylight had now succeeded to dawn, yet the first thing the stranger did was to strike a match and light a candle.

‘Will you kindly place yourself with your back to the window?’ he said. ‘I am going to apply what is called the catoptric test. You have probably heard of it?’

‘My ignorance of scientific matters is fathomless.’

The other smiled, and at once offered a simple explanation of the term. By the appearance of the candle as it reflected itself in the patient’s

eye it was possible, he said, to decide whether cataract had taken hold upon the organ.

For a minute or two he conducted his experiment carefully, and Yule was at no loss to read the result upon his face.

‘How long have you suspected that something was wrong?’ the surgeon asked, as he put down the candle.

‘For several months.’

‘You haven’t consulted anyone?’

‘No one. I have kept putting it off. Just tell me what you have discovered.’

‘The back of the right lens is affected beyond a doubt.’

‘That means, I take it, that before very long I shall be practically blind?’

‘I don’t like to speak with an air of authority. After all I am only a surgeon who has bungled himself into pauperdom. You must see a competent man; that much I can tell you in all earnestness. Do you use your eyes much?’

‘Fourteen hours a day, that’s all.’

‘H’m! You are a literary man, I think?’

‘I am. My name is Alfred Yule.’

He had some faint hope that the name might be recognised; that would have gone far, for the moment, to counteract his trouble. But not

even this poor satisfaction was to be granted him ; to his hearer the name evidently conveyed nothing.

‘See a competent man, Mr. Yule. Science has advanced rapidly since the days when I was a student ; I am only able to assure you of the existence of disease.’

They talked for half an hour, until both were shaking with cold. Then Yule thrust his hand into his pocket.

‘You will of course allow me to offer such return as I am able,’ he said. ‘The information isn’t pleasant, but I am glad to have it.’

He laid five shillings on the chest of drawers—there was no table. The stranger expressed his gratitude.

‘My name is Duke,’ he said, ‘and I was christened Victor—possibly because I was doomed to defeat in life. I wish you could have associated the memory of me with happier circumstances.’

They shook hands, and Yule quitted the house.

He came out again by Camden Town station. The coffee-stall had disappeared ; the traffic of the great highway was growing uproarious. Among all the strugglers for existence who

rushed this way and that, Alfred Yule felt himself a man chosen for fate's heaviest infliction. He never questioned the accuracy of the stranger's judgment, and he hoped for no mitigation of the doom it threatened. His life was over—and wasted.

He might as well go home, and take his place meekly by the fireside. He was beaten. Soon to be a useless old man, a burden and annoyance to whosoever had pity on him.

It was a curious effect of the imagination that since coming into the open air again his eyesight seemed to be far worse than before. He irritated his nerves of vision by incessant tests, closing first one eye then the other, comparing his view of nearer objects with the appearance of others more remote, fancying an occasional pain—which could have had no connection with his disease. The literary projects which had stirred so actively in his mind twelve hours ago were become an insubstantial memory; to the one crushing blow had succeeded a second, which was fatal. He could hardly recall what special piece of work he had been engaged upon last night. His thoughts were such as if actual blindness had really fallen upon him.

At half-past eight he entered the house. Mrs.

Yule was standing at the foot of the stairs ; she looked at him, then turned away towards the kitchen. He went upstairs. On coming down again he found breakfast ready as usual, and seated himself at the table. Two letters waited for him there ; he opened them.

When Mrs. Yule came into the room a few moments later she was astonished by a burst of loud, mocking laughter from her husband, excited, as it appeared, by something he was reading.

‘ Is Marian up ? ’ he asked, turning to her.

‘ Yes.’

‘ She is not coming to breakfast ? ’

‘ No.’

‘ Then just take that letter to her, and ask her to read it.’

Mrs. Yule ascended to her daughter’s bedroom. She knocked, was bidden enter, and found Marian packing clothes in a trunk. The girl looked as if she had been up all night ; her eyes bore the traces of much weeping.

‘ He has come back, dear,’ said Mrs. Yule, in the low voice of apprehension, ‘ and he says you are to read this letter.’

Marian took the sheet, unfolded it, and read. As soon as she had reached the end she looked

wildly at her mother, seemed to endeavour vainly to speak, then fell to the floor in unconsciousness. The mother was only just able to break the violence of her fall. Having snatched a pillow and placed it beneath Marian's head, she rushed to the door and called loudly for her husband, who in a moment appeared.

'What is it?' she cried to him. 'Look, she has fallen down in a faint. Why are you treating her like this?'

'Attend to her,' Yule replied roughly. 'I suppose you know better than I do what to do when a person faints.'

The swoon lasted for several minutes.

'What's in the letter?' asked Mrs. Yule whilst chafing the lifeless hands.

'Her money's lost. The people who were to pay it have just failed.'

'She won't get anything?'

'Most likely nothing at all.'

The letter was a private communication from one of John Yule's executors. It seemed likely that the demand upon Turberville & Co. for an account of the deceased partner's share in their business had helped to bring about a crisis in affairs that were already unstable. Something might be recovered in the legal pro-

ceedings that would result, but there were circumstances which made the outlook very doubtful.

As Marian came to herself her father left the room. An hour afterwards Mrs. Yule summoned him again to the girl's chamber ; he went, and found Marian lying on the bed, looking like one who had been long ill.

‘I wish to ask you a few questions,’ she said, without raising herself. ‘Must my legacy necessarily be paid out of that investment?’

‘It must. Those are the terms of the will.’

‘If nothing can be recovered from those people, I have no remedy?’

‘None whatever that I can see.’

‘But when a firm is bankrupt they generally pay some portion of their debts?’

‘Sometimes. I know nothing of the case.’

‘This of course happens to me,’ Marian said, with intense bitterness. ‘None of the other legatees will suffer, I suppose?’

‘Someone must, but to a very small extent.’

‘Of course. When shall I have direct information?’

‘You can write to Mr. Holden ; you have his address.’

‘Thank you. That’s all.’

He was dismissed, and went quietly away.

CHAPTER XXX

WAITING ON DESTINY

THROUGHOUT the day Marian kept her room. Her intention to leave the house was, of course, abandoned ; she was the prisoner of fate. Mrs. Yule would have tended her with unremitting devotion, but the girl desired to be alone. At times she lay in silent anguish ; frequently her tears broke forth, and she sobbed until weariness overcame her. In the afternoon she wrote a letter to Mr. Holden, begging that she might be kept constantly acquainted with the progress of things.

At five her mother brought tea.

‘Wouldn’t it be better if you went to bed now, Marian?’ she suggested.

‘To bed? But I am going out in an hour or two.’

‘Oh, you can’t, dear! It’s so bitterly cold. It wouldn’t be good for you.’

‘I have to go out, mother, so we won’t speak of it.’

It was not safe to reply. Mrs. Yule sat down, and watched the girl raise the cup to her mouth with trembling hand.

‘This won’t make any difference to you—in the end, my darling,’ the mother ventured to say at length, alluding for the first time to the effect of the catastrophe on Marian’s immediate prospects.

‘Of course not,’ was the reply, in a tone of self-persuasion.

‘Mr. Milvain is sure to have plenty of money before long.’

‘Yes.’

‘You feel much better now, don’t you?’

‘Much. I am quite well again.’

At seven, Marian went out. Finding herself weaker than she had thought, she stopped an empty cab that presently passed her, and so drove to the Milvains’ lodgings. In her agitation she inquired for Mr. Milvain, instead of for Dora, as was her habit; it mattered very little, for the landlady and her servants were of course under no misconception regarding this young lady’s visits. Jasper was at home, and working. He

had but to look at Marian to see that something wretched had been going on at her home; naturally he supposed it the result of his letter to Mr. Yule.

‘Your father has been behaving brutally,’ he said, holding her hands and gazing anxiously at her.

‘There is something far worse than that, Jasper.’

‘Worse?’

She threw off her outdoor things, then took the fatal letter from her pocket and handed it to him. Jasper gave a whistle of consternation, and looked vacantly from the paper to Marian’s countenance.

‘How the deuce comes this about?’ he exclaimed. ‘Why, wasn’t your uncle aware of the state of things?’

‘Perhaps he was. He may have known that the legacy was a mere form.’

‘You are the only one affected?’

‘So father says. It’s sure to be the case.’

‘This has upset you horribly, I can see. Sit down, Marian. When did the letter come?’

‘This morning.’

‘And you have been fretting over it all day. But come, we must keep up our courage; you

may get something substantial out of the scoundrels still.'

Even whilst he spoke his eyes wandered absently. On the last word his voice failed, and he fell into abstraction. Marian's look was fixed upon him, and he became conscious of it. He tried to smile.

'What were you writing?' she asked, making involuntary diversion from the calamitous theme.

'Rubbish for the *Will-o'-the-Wisp*. Listen to this paragraph about English concert audiences.'

It was as necessary to him as to her to have a respite before the graver discussion began. He seized gladly the opportunity she offered, and read several pages of manuscript, slipping from one topic to another. To hear him one would have supposed that he was in his ordinary mood; he laughed at his own jokes and points.

'They'll have to pay me more,' was the remark with which he closed. 'I only wanted to make myself indispensable to them, and at the end of this year I shall feel pretty sure of that. They'll have to give me two guineas a column; by Jove! they will.'

'And you may hope for much more than that, mayn't you, before long?'

'Oh, I shall transfer myself to a better paper

presently. It seems to me I must be stirring to some purpose.'

He gave her a significant look.

'What shall we do, Jasper?'

'Work and wait, I suppose.'

'There's something I must tell you. Father said I had better sign that Harrington article myself. If I do that, I shall have a right to the money, I think. It will at least be eight guineas. And why shouldn't I go on writing for myself—for us? You can help me to think of subjects.'

'First of all, what about my letter to your father? We are forgetting all about it.'

'He refused to answer.'

Marian avoided closer description of what had happened. It was partly that she felt ashamed of her father's unreasoning wrath, and feared lest Jasper's pride might receive an injury from which she in turn would suffer; partly that she was unwilling to pain her lover by making display of all she had undergone.

'Oh, he refused to reply! Surely that is extreme behaviour.'

What she dreaded seemed to be coming to pass. Jasper stood rather stiffly, and threw his head back.

'You know the reason, dear. That prejudice

has entered into his very life. It is not you he dislikes ; that is impossible. He thinks of you only as he would of anyone connected with Mr. Fadge.'

'Well, well ; it isn't a matter of much moment. But what I have in mind is this. Will it be possible for you, whilst living at home, to take a position of independence, and say that you are going to work for your own profit?'

'At least I might claim half the money I can earn. And I was thinking more of——.'

'Of what?'

'When I am your wife, I may be able to help. I could earn thirty or forty pounds a year, I think. That would pay the rent of a small house.'

She spoke with shaken voice, her eyes fixed upon his face.

'But, my dear Marian, we surely oughtn't to think of marrying so long as expenses are so nicely fitted as all that?'

'No. I only meant——'

She faltered, and her tongue became silent as her heart sank.

'It simply means,' pursued Jasper, seating himself and crossing his legs, 'that I must move

heaven and earth to improve my position. You know that my faith in myself is not small; there's no knowing what I might do if I used every effort. But, upon my word, I don't see much hope of our being able to marry for a year or two under the most favourable circumstances.'

'No; I quite understand that.'

'Can you promise to keep a little love for me all that time?' he asked with a constrained smile.

'You know me too well to fear.'

'I thought you seemed a little doubtful.'

His tone was not altogether that which makes banter pleasant between lovers. Marian looked at him fearfully. Was it possible for him in truth so to misunderstand her? He had never satisfied her heart's desire of infinite love; she never spoke with him but she was oppressed with the suspicion that his love was not as great as hers, and, worse still, that he did not wholly comprehend the self-surrender which she strove to make plain in every word.

'You don't say that seriously, Jasper?'

'But answer seriously.'

'How can you doubt that I would wait faithfully for you for years if it were necessary?'

‘It mustn’t be years, that’s very certain. I think it preposterous for a man to hold a woman bound in that hopeless way.’

‘But what question is there of holding me bound? Is love dependent on fixed engagements? Do you feel that, if we agreed to part, your love would be at once a thing of the past?’

‘Why no, of course not.’

‘Oh, but how coldly you speak, Jasper!’

She could not breathe a word which might be interpreted as fear lest the change of her circumstances should make a change in his feeling. Yet that was in her mind. The existence of such a fear meant, of course, that she did not entirely trust him, and viewed his character as something less than noble. Very seldom indeed is a woman free from such doubts, however absolute her love; and perhaps it is just as rare for a man to credit in his heart all the praises he speaks of his beloved. Passion is compatible with a great many of these imperfections of intellectual esteem. To see more clearly into Jasper’s personality was, for Marian, to suffer the more intolerable dread lest she should lose him.

She went to his side. Her heart ached because, in her great misery, he had not fondled

her and intoxicated her senses with loving words.

‘How can I make you feel how much I love you?’ she murmured.

‘You mustn’t be so literal, dearest. Women are so desperately matter-of-fact; it comes out even in their love-talk.’

Marian was not without perception of the irony of such an opinion on Jasper’s lips.

‘I am content for you to think so,’ she said. ‘There is only one fact in my life of any importance, and I can never lose sight of it.’

‘Well now, we are quite sure of each other. Tell me plainly, do you think me capable of forsaking you because you have perhaps lost your money?’

The question made her wince. If delicacy had held *her* tongue, it had no control of *his*.

‘How can I answer that better,’ she said, ‘than by saying I love you?’

It was no answer, and Jasper, though obtuse compared with her, understood that it was none. But the emotion which had prompted his words was genuine enough. Her touch, the perfume of her passion, had their exalting effect upon him. He felt in all sincerity that to forsake her

would be a baseness, revenged by the loss of such a wife.

‘There’s an uphill fight before me, that’s all,’ he said, ‘instead of the pretty smooth course I have been looking forward to. But I don’t fear it, Marian. I’m not the fellow to be beaten. You shall be my wife, and you shall have as many luxuries as if you had brought me a fortune.’

‘Luxuries! Oh, how childish you seem to think me!’

‘Not a bit of it. Luxuries are a most important part of life. I had rather not live at all than never possess them. Let me give you a useful hint; if ever I seem to you to flag, just remind me of the difference between these lodgings and a richly furnished house. Just hint to me that So-and-so, the journalist, goes about in his carriage, and can give his wife a box at the theatre. Just ask me, casually, how I should like to run over to the Riviera when London fogs are thickest. You understand? That’s the way to keep me at it like a steam-engine.’

‘You are right. All those things enable one to live a better and fuller life. Oh, how cruel that I—that we are robbed in this way! You can have no idea how terrible a blow it was to me when I read that letter this morning.’

She was on the point of confessing that she had swooned, but something restrained her.

‘Your father can hardly be sorry,’ said Jasper.

‘I think he speaks more harshly than he feels. The worst was, that until he got your letter he had kept hoping that I would let him have the money for a new review.’

‘Well, for the present I prefer to believe that the money isn’t all lost. If the blackguards pay ten shillings in the pound you will get two thousand five hundred out of them, and that’s something. But how do you stand? Will your position be that of an ordinary creditor?’

‘I am so ignorant. I know nothing of such things.’

‘But of course your interests will be properly looked after. Put yourself in communication with this Mr. Holden. I’ll have a look into the law on the subject. Let us hope as long as we can. By Jove! There’s no other way of facing it.’

‘No, indeed.’

‘Mrs. Reardon and the rest of them are safe enough, I suppose?’

‘Oh, no doubt.’

‘Confound them!—It grows upon one. One doesn’t take in the whole of such a misfortune at

once. We must hold on to the last rag of hope, and in the meantime I'll half work myself to death. Are you going to see the girls?'

'Not to-night. You must tell them.'

'Dora will cry her eyes out. Upon my word, Maud'll have to draw in her horns. I must frighten her into economy and hard work.'

He again lost himself in anxious reverie.

'Marian, couldn't you try your hand at fiction?'

She started, remembering that her father had put the same question so recently.

'I'm afraid I could do nothing worth doing.'

'That isn't exactly the question. Could you do anything that would sell? With very moderate success in fiction you might make three times as much as you ever will by magazine pot-boilers. A girl like you. Oh, you might manage, I should think.'

'A girl like me?'

'Well, I mean that love-scenes, and that kind of thing, would be very much in your line.'

Marian was not given to blushing; very few girls are, even on strong provocation. For the first time Jasper saw her cheeks colour deeply, and it was with anything but pleasure. His

words were coarsely inconsiderate, and wounded her.

‘I think that is not my work,’ she said coldly, looking away.

‘But surely there’s no harm in my saying——’ he paused in astonishment. ‘I meant nothing that could offend you.’

‘I know you didn’t, Jasper. But you make me think that——’

‘Don’t be so literal again, my dear girl. Come here and forgive me.’

She did not approach, but only because the painful thought he had excited kept her to that spot.

‘Come, Marian! Then I must come to you.’

He did so and held her in his arms.

‘Try your hand at a novel, dear, if you can possibly make time. Put me in it, if you like, and make me an insensible masculine. The experiment is worth a try I’m certain. At all events do a few chapters, and let me see them. A chapter needn’t take you more than a couple of hours I should think.’

Marian refrained from giving any promise. She seemed irresponsive to his caresses. That thought which at times gives trouble to all women of strong emotions was working in her: had

she been too demonstrative, and made her love too cheap? Now that Jasper's love might be endangered, it behoved her to use any arts which nature prompted. And so, for once, he was not wholly satisfied with her, and at their parting he wondered what subtle change had affected her manner to him.

‘Why didn't Marian come to speak a word?’ said Dora, when her brother entered the girls' sitting-room about ten o'clock.

‘You knew she was with me, then?’

‘We heard her voice as she was going away.’

‘She brought me some enspiriting news, and thought it better I should have the reporting of it to you.’

With brevity he made known what had befallen.

‘Cheerful, isn't it? The kind of thing that strengthens one's trust in Providence.’

The girls were appalled. Maud, who was reading by the fireside, let her book fall to her lap, and knit her brows darkly.

‘Then your marriage must be put off, of course?’ said Dora.

‘Well, I shouldn't be surprised if that were found necessary,’ replied her brother caustically.

He was able now to give vent to the feeling which in Marian's presence was suppressed, partly out of consideration for her, and partly owing to her influence.

'And shall we have to go back to our old lodgings again?' inquired Maud.

Jasper gave no answer, but kicked a footstool savagely out of his way and paced the room.

'Oh, do you think we need?' said Dora, with unusual protest against economy.

'Remember that it's a matter for your own consideration,' Jasper replied at length. 'You are living on your own resources, you know.'

Maud glanced at her sister, but Dora was preoccupied.

'Why do you prefer to stay here?' Jasper asked abruptly of the younger girl.

'It is so very much nicer,' she replied with some embarrassment.

He bit the ends of his moustache, and his eyes glared at the impalpable thwarting force that to imagination seemed to fill the air about him.

'A lesson against being over-hasty,' he muttered, again kicking the footstool.

'Did you make that considerate remark to Marian?' asked Maud.

‘There would have been no harm if I had done. She knows that I shouldn’t have been such an ass as to talk of marriage without the prospect of something to live upon.’

‘I suppose she’s wretched?’ said Dora.

‘What else can you expect?’

‘And did you propose to release her from the burden of her engagement?’ Maud inquired.

‘It’s a confounded pity that you’re not rich, Maud,’ replied her brother with an involuntary laugh. ‘You would have a brilliant reputation for wit.’

He walked about and ejaculated splenetic phrases on the subject of his ill-luck.

‘We are here, and here we must stay,’ was the final expression of his mood. ‘I have only one superstition that I know of, and that forbids me to take a step backward. If I went into poorer lodgings again I should feel it was inviting defeat. I shall stay as long as the position is tenable. Let us get on to Christmas, and then see how things look. Heavens! Suppose we had married, and after that lost the money!’

‘You would have been no worse off than plenty of literary men,’ said Dora.

‘Perhaps not. But as I have made up my mind to be considerably better off than most

literary men that reflection wouldn't console me much. Things are *in statu quo*, that's all. I have to rely upon my own efforts. What's the time? Half-past ten; I can get two hours' work before going to bed.'

And nodding a good-night he left them.

When Marian entered the house and went upstairs, she was followed by her mother. On Mrs. Yule's countenance there was a new distress, she had been crying recently.

'Have you seen him?' the mother asked.

'Yes. We have talked about it.'

'What does he wish you to do, dear?'

'There's nothing to be done except wait.'

'Father has been telling me something, Marian,' said Mrs. Yule after a long silence. 'He says he is going to be blind. There's something the matter with his eyes, and he went to see someone about it this afternoon. He'll get worse and worse, until there has been an operation; and perhaps he'll never be able to use his eyes properly again.'

The girl listened in an attitude of despair.

'He has seen an oculist?—a really good doctor?'

'He says he went to one of the best.'

‘ And how did he speak to you ? ’

‘ He doesn’t seem to care much what happens. He talked of going to the workhouse, and things like that. But it couldn’t ever come to that, could it, Marian ? Wouldn’t somebody help him ? ’

‘ There’s not much help to be expected in this world,’ answered the girl.

Physical weariness brought her a few hours of oblivion as soon as she had lain down, but her sleep came to an end in the early morning, when the pressure of evil dreams forced her back to consciousness of real sorrows and cares. A fog-veiled sky added its weight to crush her spirit ; at the hour when she usually rose it was still all but as dark as midnight. Her mother’s voice at the door begged her to lie and rest until it grew lighter, and she willingly complied, feeling indeed scarcely capable of leaving her bed.

The thick black fog penetrated every corner of the house. It could be smelt and tasted. Such an atmosphere produces low-spirited languor even in the vigorous and hopeful ; to those wasted by suffering it is the very reek of the bottomless pit, poisoning the soul. Her face colourless as the pillow, Marian lay neither sleeping nor awake, in blank extremity of woe ; tears now and then ran down her cheeks, and at times

her body was shaken with a throe such as might result from anguish of the torture chamber.

Midway in the morning, when it was still necessary to use artificial light, she went down to the sitting-room. The course of household life had been thrown into confusion by the disasters of the last day or two ; Mrs. Yule, who occupied herself almost exclusively with questions of economy, cleanliness, and routine, had not the heart to pursue her round of duties, and this morning, though under normal circumstances she would have been busy in 'turning out' the dining-room, she moved aimlessly and despondently about the house, giving the servant contradictory orders and then blaming herself for her absent mindedness. In the troubles of her husband and her daughter she had scarcely greater share—so far as active participation went—than if she had been only a faithful old housekeeper ; she could only grieve and lament that such discord had come between the two whom she loved, and that in herself was no power even to solace their distresses. Marian found her standing in the passage, with a duster in one hand and a hearth-brush in the other.

'Your father has asked to see you when you come down,' Mrs. Yule whispered.

‘I’ll go to him.’

Marian entered the study. Her father was not in his place at the writing-table, nor yet seated in the chair which he used when he had leisure to draw up to the fireside; he sat in front of one of the bookcases, bent forward as if seeking a volume, but his chin was propped upon his hand, and he had maintained this position for a long time. He did not immediately move. When he raised his head Marian saw that he looked older, and she noticed—or fancied she did—that there was some unfamiliar peculiarity about his eyes.

‘I am obliged to you for coming,’ he began with distant formality. ‘Since I saw you last I have learnt something which makes a change in my position and prospects, and it is necessary to speak on the subject. I won’t detain you more than a few minutes.’

He coughed, and seemed to consider his next words.

‘Perhaps I needn’t repeat what I have told your mother. You have learnt it from her, I dare say?’

‘Yes, with much grief.’

‘Thank you, but we will leave aside that aspect of the matter. For a few more months I

may be able to pursue my ordinary work, but before long I shall certainly be disabled from earning my livelihood by literature. Whether this will in any way affect your own position I don't know. Will you have the goodness to tell me whether you still purpose leaving this house ?'

'I have no means of doing so.'

'Is there any likelihood of your marriage taking place, let us say, within four months ?'

'Only if the executors recover my money, or a large portion of it.'

'I understand. My reason for asking is this. My lease of this house terminates at the end of next March, and I shall certainly not be justified in renewing it. If you are able to provide for yourself in any way it will be sufficient for me to rent two rooms after that. This disease which affects my eyes may be only temporary ; in due time an operation may render it possible for me to work again. In hope of that I shall probably have to borrow a sum of money on the security of my life insurance, though in the first instance I shall make the most of what I can get for the furniture of the house and a large part of my library ; your mother and I could live at very

slight expense in lodgings. If the disease prove irremediable, I must prepare myself for the worst. What I wish to say is, that it will be better if from to-day you consider yourself as working for your own subsistence. So long as I remain here this house is of course your home ; there can be no question between us of trivial expenses. But it is right that you should understand what my prospects are. I shall soon have no home to offer you ; you must look to your own efforts for support.'

'I am prepared to do that, father.'

'I think you will have no great difficulty in earning enough for yourself. I have done my best to train you in writing for the periodicals, and your natural abilities are considerable. If you marry, I wish you a happy life. The end of mine, of many long years of unremitting toil, is failure and destitution.'

Marian sobbed.

'That's all I had to say,' concluded her father, his voice tremulous with self-compassion. 'I will only beg that there may be no further profitless discussion between us. This room is open to you, as always, and I see no reason why we should not converse on subjects disconnected with our personal differences.'

‘Is there no remedy for cataract in its early stages?’ asked Marian.

‘None. You can read up the subject for yourself at the British Museum. I prefer not to speak of it.’

‘Will you let me be what help to you I can?’

‘For the present the best you can do is to establish a connection for yourself with editors. Your name will be an assistance to you. My advice is, that you send your “Harrington” article forthwith to Trenchard, writing him a note. If you desire my help in the suggestion of new subjects, I will do my best to be of use.’

Marian withdrew. She went to the sitting-room, where an ochreous daylight was beginning to diffuse itself and to render the lamp superfluous. With the dissipation of the fog rain had set in; its splashing upon the muddy pavement was audible.

Mrs. Yule, still with a duster in her hand, sat on the sofa. Marian took a place beside her. They talked in low, broken tones, and wept together over their miseries.

CHAPTER XXXI

A RESCUE AND A SUMMONS

THE chances are that you have neither understanding nor sympathy for men such as Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen. They merely provoke you. They seem to you inert, flabby, weakly envious, foolishly obstinate, impiously mutinous, and many other things. You are made angrily contemptuous by their failure to get on; why don't they bestir themselves, push and bustle, welcome kicks so long as half-pence follow, make a place in the world's eye—in short, take a leaf from the book of Mr. Jasper Milvain?

But try to imagine a personality wholly unfitted for the rough and tumble of the world's labour-market. From the familiar point of view these men were worthless; view them in possible relation to a humane order of society, and they are admirable citizens. Nothing is easier than to condemn a type of character which is un-

equal to the coarse demands of life as it suits the average man. These two were richly endowed with the kindly and the imaginative virtues; if fate threw them amid incongruous circumstances, is their endowment of less value? You scorn their passivity; but it was their nature and their merit to be passive. Gifted with independent means, each of them would have taken quite a different aspect in your eyes. The sum of their faults was their inability to earn money; but, indeed, that inability does not call for unmingled disdain.)

It was very weak of Harold Biffen to come so near perishing of hunger as he did in the days when he was completing his novel. But he would have vastly preferred to eat and be satisfied had any method of obtaining food presented itself to him. He did not starve for the pleasure of the thing, I assure you. Pupils were difficult to get just now, and writing that he had sent to magazines had returned upon his hands. He pawned such of his possessions as he could spare, and he reduced his meals to the minimum. Nor was he uncheerful in his cold garret and with his empty stomach, for 'Mr. Bailey, Grocer,' drew steadily to an end.

He worked very slowly. The book would

make perhaps two volumes of ordinary novel size, but he had laboured over it for many months, patiently, affectionately, scrupulously. Each sentence was as good as he could make it, harmonious to the ear, with words of precious meaning skilfully set. Before sitting down to a chapter he planned it minutely in his mind; then he wrote a rough draft of it; then he elaborated the thing phrase by phrase. He had no thought of whether such toil would be recompensed in coin of the realm; nay, it was his conviction that, if with difficulty published, it could scarcely bring him money. The work must be significant, that was all he cared for. And he had no society of admiring friends to encourage him. Reardon understood the merit of the workmanship, but frankly owned that the book was repulsive to him. To the public it would be worse than repulsive—tedious, utterly uninteresting. No matter; it drew to its end.

The day of its completion was made memorable by an event decidedly more exciting, even to the author.

At eight o'clock in the evening there remained half a page to be written. Biffen had already worked about nine hours, and on breaking off to appease his hunger he doubted whether

to finish to-night or to postpone the last lines till to-morrow. The discovery that only a small crust of bread lay in the cupboard decided him to write no more; he would have to go out to purchase a loaf, and that was disturbance.

But stay; had he enough money? He searched his pockets. Two pence and two farthings; no more.

You are probably not aware that at bakers' shops in the poor quarters the price of the half-quartern loaf varies sometimes from week to week. At present, as Biffen knew, it was twopence three-farthings, a common figure. But Harold did not possess three farthings, only two. Reflecting, he remembered to have passed yesterday a shop where the bread was marked twopence halfpenny; it was a shop in a very obscure little street off Hampstead Road, some distance from Clipstone Street. Thither he must repair. He had only his hat and a muffler to put on, for again he was wearing his overcoat in default of the under one, and his ragged umbrella to take from the corner; so he went forth.

To his delight the twopence halfpenny announcement was still in the baker's window. He obtained a loaf, wrapped it in the piece of paper he had brought—small bakers decline

to supply paper for this purpose—and strode joyously homeward again.

Having eaten, he looked longingly at his manuscript. But half a page more. Should he not finish it to-night? The temptation was irresistible. He sat down, wrought with unusual speed, and at half-past ten wrote with magnificent flourish ‘The End.’

His fire was out and he had neither coals nor wood. But his feet were frozen into lifelessness. Impossible to go to bed like this; he must take another turn in the streets. It would suit his humour to ramble a while. Had it not been so late he would have gone to see Reardon, who expected the communication of this glorious news.

So again he locked his door. Half-way downstairs he stumbled over something or somebody in the dark.

‘Who is that?’ he cried.

The answer was a loud snore. Biffen went to the bottom of the house and called to the landlady.

‘Mrs. Willoughby! Who is asleep on the stairs?’

‘Why, I ’spect it’s Mr. Briggs,’ replied the woman, indulgently. ‘Don’t you mind him, Mr.

Biffen. There's no 'arm ; he's only had a little too much. I'll go up an' make him go to bed as soon as I've got my 'ands clean.'

'The necessity for waiting till then isn't obvious,' remarked the realist with a chuckle, and went his way.

He walked at a sharp pace for more than an hour, and about midnight drew near to his own quarter again. He had just turned up by the Middlesex Hospital, and was at no great distance from Clipstone Street, when a yell and scamper caught his attention ; a group of loafing blackguards on the opposite side of the way had suddenly broken up, and as they rushed off he heard the word 'Fire!' This was too common an occurrence to disturb his equanimity ; he wondered absently in which street the fire might be, but trudged on without a thought of making investigation. Repeated yells and rushes, however, assailed his apathy. Two women came tearing by him, and he shouted to them : 'Where is it ?'

'In Clipstone Street, they say,' one screamed back.

He could no longer be unconcerned. If in his own street the conflagration might be in the very house he inhabited, and in that case——

He set off at a run. Ahead of him was a thickening throng, its position indicating the entrance to Clipstone Street. Soon he found his progress retarded; he had to dodge this way and that, to force progress, to guard himself against overthrows by the torrent of ruffiandom which always breaks forth at the cry of fire. He could now smell the smoke, and all at once a black volume of it, bursting from upper windows, alarmed his sight. At once he was aware that, if not his own dwelling, it must be one of those on either side that was in flames. As yet no engine had arrived, and straggling policemen were only just beginning to make their way to the scene of uproar. By dint of violent effort Biffen moved forward yard by yard. A tongue of flame which suddenly illumined the fronts of the houses put an end to his doubt.

‘Let me get past!’ he shouted to the gaping and swaying mass of people in front of him. ‘I live there! I must go upstairs to save something!’

His educated accent moved attention. Repeating the demand again and again he succeeded in getting forward, and at length was near enough to see that people were dragging articles of furniture out on to the pavement.

‘That you, Mr. Biffen?’ cried someone to him.

He recognised the face of a fellow-lodger.

‘Is it possible to get up to my room?’ broke frantically from his lips.

‘You’ll never get up there. It’s that —— Briggs’—the epithet was alliterative—‘as upset his —— lamp, and I ‘ope he’ll —— well get roasted to death.’

Biffen leaped on to the threshold, and crashed against Mrs. Willoughby, the landlady, who was carrying a huge bundle of household linen.

‘I told you to look after that drunken brute!’ he said to her. ‘Can I get upstairs?’

‘What do I care whether you can or not!’ the woman shrieked. ‘My God! And all them new chairs as I bought——!’

He heard no more, but bounded over a confusion of obstacles and in a moment was on the landing of the first storey. Here he encountered a man who had not lost his head, a stalwart mechanic engaged in slipping clothes on to two little children.

‘If somebody don’t drag that fellow Briggs down he’ll be dead,’ observed the man. ‘He’s layin’ outside his door. I pulled him out, but I can’t do no more for him.’

Smoke grew thick on the staircase. Burning was as yet confined to that front room on the second floor tenanted by Briggs the disastrous, but in all likelihood the ceiling was ablaze, and if so it would be all but impossible for Biffen to gain his own chamber, which was at the back on the floor above. No one was making an attempt to extinguish the fire; personal safety and the rescue of their possessions alone occupied the thoughts of such people as were still in the house. Desperate with the dread of losing his manuscript, his toil, his one hope, the realist scarcely stayed to listen to a warning that the fumes were impassable; with head bent he rushed up to the next landing. There lay Briggs, perchance already stifled, and through the open door Biffen had a horrible vision of furnace fury. To go yet higher would have been madness but for one encouragement: he knew that on his own storey was a ladder giving access to a trap-door, by which he might issue on to the roof, whence escape to the adjacent houses would be practicable. Again a leap forward!

In fact, not two minutes elapsed from his commencing the ascent of the stairs to the moment when, all but fainting, he thrust the key into his door and fell forward into purer air.

Fell, for he was on his knees, and had begun to suffer from a sense of failing power, a sick whirling of the brain, a terror of hideous death. His manuscript was on the table, where he had left it after regarding and handling it with joyful self-congratulation; though it was pitch dark in the room, he could at once lay his hand on the heap of paper. Now he had it; now it was jammed tight under his left arm; now he was out again on the landing, in smoke more deadly than ever.

He said to himself: 'If I cannot instantly break out by the trap-door it's all over with me.' That the exit would open to a vigorous thrust he knew, having amused himself not long ago by going on to the roof. He touched the ladder, sprang upwards, and felt the trap above him. But he could not push it back. 'I'm a dead man,' flashed across his mind, 'and all for the sake of "Mr. Bailey, Grocer."' A frenzied effort, the last of which his muscles were capable, and the door yielded. His head was now through the aperture, and though the smoke swept up about him, that gasp of cold air gave him strength to throw himself on the flat portion of the roof that he had reached.

So for a minute or two he lay. Then he was

able to stand, to survey his position, and to walk along by the parapet. He looked down upon the surging and shouting crowd in Clipstone Street, but could see it only at intervals, owing to the smoke that rolled from the front windows below him.

What he had now to do he understood perfectly. This roof was divided from those on either hand by a stack of chimneys; to get round the end of these stacks was impossible, or at all events too dangerous a feat unless it were the last resource, but by climbing to the apex of the slates he would be able to reach the chimney-pots, to drag himself up to them, and somehow to tumble over on to the safer side. To this undertaking he forthwith addressed himself. Without difficulty he reached the ridge; standing on it he found that only by stretching his arm to the utmost could he grip the top of a chimney-pot. Had he the strength necessary to raise himself by such a hold? And suppose the pot broke?

His life was still in danger; the increasing volumes of smoke warned him that in a few minutes the uppermost storey might be in flames. He took off his overcoat to allow himself more freedom of action; the manuscript, now an encumbrance, must precede him over the chim-

ney-stack, and there was only one way of effecting that. With care he stowed the papers into the pockets of the coat ; then he rolled the garment together, tied it up in its own sleeves, took a deliberate aim—and the bundle was for the present in safety.

Now for the gymnastic endeavour. Standing on tiptoe, he clutched the rim of the chimney-pot, and strove to raise himself. The hold was firm enough, but his arms were far too puny to perform such work, even when death would be the penalty of failure. Too long he had lived on insufficient food and sat over the debilitating desk. He swung this way and that, trying to throw one of his knees as high as the top of the brickwork, but there was no chance of his succeeding. Dropping on to the slates, he sat there in perturbation.

He must cry for help. In front it was scarcely possible to stand by the parapet, owing to the black clouds of smoke, now mingled with sparks ; perchance he might attract the notice of some person either in the yards behind or at the back windows of other houses. The night was so obscure that he could not hope to be seen ; voice alone must be depended upon, and there was no certainty that it would

be heard far enough. Though he stood in his shirt-sleeves in a bitter wind no sense of cold affected him ; his face was beaded with perspiration drawn forth by his futile struggle to climb. He let himself slide down the rear slope, and, holding by the end of the chimney brickwork, looked into the yards. At the same instant a face appeared to him—that of a man who was trying to obtain a glimpse of this roof from that of the next house by thrusting out his head beyond the block of chimneys.

‘Hollo!’ cried the stranger. ‘What are you doing there?’

‘Trying to escape, of course. Help me to get on to your roof.’

‘By God! I expected to see the fire coming through already. Are you the —— as upset his lamp an’ fired the bloomin’ ’ouse?’

‘Not I! He’s lying drunk on the stairs; dead by this time.’

‘By God! I wouldn’t have helped you if you’d been him. How are you coming round? Blest if I see! You’ll break your bloomin’ neck if you try this corner. You’ll have to come over the chimneys; wait till I get a ladder.’

‘And a rope,’ shouted Biffen.

The man disappeared for five minutes. To

Biffen it seemed half an hour ; he felt, or imagined he felt, the slates getting hot beneath him, and the smoke was again catching his breath. But at length there was a shout from the top of the chimney-stack. The rescuer had seated himself on one of the pots, and was about to lower on Biffen's side a ladder which had enabled him to ascend from the other. Biffen planted the lowest rung very carefully on the ridge of the roof, climbed as lightly as possible, got a footing between two pots ; the ladder was then pulled over, and both men descended in safety.

‘Have you seen a coat lying about here?’ was Biffen's first question. ‘I threw mine over.’

‘What did you do that for?’

‘There are some valuable papers in the pockets.’

They searched in vain ; on neither side of the roof was the coat discoverable.

‘You must have pitched it into the street,’ said the man.

This was a terrible blow ; Biffen forgot his rescue from destruction in lament for the loss of his manuscript. He would have pursued the fruitless search, but his companion, who feared

that the fire might spread to adjoining houses, insisted on his passing through the trap-door and descending the stairs.

‘If the coat fell into the street,’ Biffen said, when they were down on the ground floor, ‘of course it’s lost; it would be stolen at once. But may not it have fallen into your back yard?’

He was standing in the midst of a cluster of alarmed people, who stared at him in astonishment, for the reek through which he had fought his way had given him the aspect of a sweep. His suggestion prompted someone to run into the yard, with the result that a muddy bundle was brought in and exhibited to him.

‘Is this your coat, Mister?’

‘Heaven be thanked! That’s it! There are valuable papers in the pockets.’

He unrolled the garment, felt to make sure that ‘Mr. Bailey’ was safe, and finally put it on.

‘Will anyone here let me sit down in a room and give me a drink of water?’ he asked, feeling now as if he must drop with exhaustion.

The man who had rescued him performed this further kindness, and for half an hour, whilst tumult indescribable raged about him, Biffen sat recovering his strength. By that time the fire-

men were hard at work, but one floor of the burning house had already fallen through, and it was probable that nothing but the shell would be saved. After giving a full account of himself to the people among whom he had come, Harold declared his intention of departing; his need of repose was imperative, and he could not hope for it in this proximity to the fire. As he had no money, his only course was to inquire for a room at some house in the immediate neighbourhood, where the people would receive him in a charitable spirit.

With the aid of the police he passed to where the crowd was thinner, and came out into Cleveland Street. Here most of the house-doors were open, and he made several applications for hospitality, but either his story was doubted or his grimy appearance predisposed people against him. At length, when again his strength was all but at an end, he made appeal to a policeman.

‘Surely you can tell,’ he protested, after explaining his position, ‘that I don’t want to cheat anybody. I shall have money to-morrow. If no one will take me in you must haul me on some charge to the police-station; I shall have to lie down on the pavement in a minute.’

The officer recognised a man who was stand-

ing half-dressed on a threshold close by; he stepped up to him, and made representations which were successful. In a few minutes Biffen took possession of an underground room furnished as a bedchamber, which he agreed to rent for a week. His landlord was not ungracious, and went so far as to supply him with warm water, that he might in a measure cleanse himself. This operation rapidly performed, the hapless author flung himself into bed, and before long was fast asleep.

When he went upstairs about nine o'clock in the morning he discovered that his host kept an oil-shop.

‘Lost everything, have you?’ asked the man sympathetically.

‘Everything, except the clothes I wear and some papers that I managed to save. All my books burnt!’

Biffen shook his head dolorously.

‘Your account-books!’ cried the dealer in oil. ‘Dear, dear!—and what might your business be?’

The author corrected this misapprehension. In the end he was invited to break his fast, which he did right willingly. Then, with assurances that he would return before nightfall, he

left the house. His steps were naturally first directed to Clipstone Street; the familiar abode was a gruesome ruin, still smoking. Neighbours informed him that Mr. Briggs's body had been brought forth in a horrible condition; but this was the only loss of life that had happened.

Thence he struck eastward, and at eleven came to Manville Street, Islington. He found Reardon by the fireside, looking very ill, and speaking with hoarseness.

‘Another cold?’

‘It looks like it. I wish you would take the trouble to go and buy me some vermin-killer. That would suit my case.’

‘Then what would suit mine? Behold me, undeniably a philosopher; in the literal sense of the words *omnia mea mecum porto*.’

He recounted his adventures, and with such humorous vivacity that when he ceased the two laughed together as if nothing more amusing had ever been heard.

‘Ah, but my books, my books!’ exclaimed Biffen, with a genuine groan. ‘And all my notes! At one fell swoop! If I didn’t laugh, old friend, I should sit down and cry; indeed I should. All my classics, with years of scribbling in the margins! How am I to buy them again?’

‘ You rescued “ Mr. Bailey.” He must repay you.’

Biffen had already laid the manuscript on the table ; it was dirty and crumpled, but not to such an extent as to render copying necessary. Lovingly he smoothed the pages and set them in order, then he wrapped the whole in a piece of brown paper which Reardon supplied, and wrote upon it the address of a firm of publishers.

‘ Have you note-paper ? I’ll write to them ; impossible to call in my present guise.’

Indeed his attire was more like that of a bankrupt costermonger than of a man of letters. Collar he had none, for the griminess of that he wore last night had necessitated its being thrown aside ; round his throat was a dirty handkerchief. His coat had been brushed, but its recent experiences had brought it one stage nearer to that dissolution which must very soon be its fate. His grey trousers were now black, and his boots looked as if they had not been cleaned for weeks.

‘ Shall I say anything about the character of the book ? ’ he asked, seating himself with pen and paper. ‘ Shall I hint that it deals with the ignobly decent ? ’

‘Better let them form their own judgment,’ replied Reardon, in his hoarse voice.

‘Then I’ll just say that I submit to them a novel of modern life, the scope of which is in some degree indicated by its title. Pity they can’t know how nearly it became a holocaust, and that I risked my life to save it. If they’re good enough to accept it I’ll tell them the story. And now, Reardon, I’m ashamed of myself, but can you without inconvenience lend me ten shillings?’

‘Easily.’

‘I must write to two pupils, to inform them of my change of address—from garret to cellar. And I must ask help from my prosperous brother. He gives it me unreluctantly, I know, but I am always loath to apply to him. May I use your paper for these purposes?’

The brother of whom he spoke was employed in a house of business at Liverpool; the two had not met for years, but they corresponded, and were on terms such as Harold indicated. When he had finished his letters, and had received the half-sovereign from Reardon, he went his way to deposit the brown-paper parcel at the publishers’. The clerk who received it from his hands probably thought that

the author might have chosen a more respectable messenger.

Two days later, early in the evening, the friends were again enjoying each other's company in Reardon's room. Both were invalids, for Biffen had of course caught a cold from his exposure in shirt-sleeves on the roof, and he was suffering from the shock to his nerves; but the thought that his novel was safe in the hands of publishers gave him energy to resist these influences. The absence of the pipe, for neither had any palate for tobacco at present, was the only external peculiarity of this meeting. There seemed no reason why they should not meet frequently before the parting which would come at Christmas; but Reardon was in a mood of profound sadness, and several times spoke as if already he were bidding his friend farewell.

‘I find it difficult to think,’ he said, ‘that you will always struggle on in such an existence as this. To every man of metal there does come an opportunity, and it surely is time for yours to present itself. I have a superstitious faith in “Mr. Bailey.” If he leads you to triumph, don't altogether forget me.’

‘Don’t talk nonsense.’

‘What ages it seems since that day when I saw you in the library at Hastings, and heard you ask in vain for my book! And how grateful I was to you! I wonder whether any mortal ever asks for my books nowadays? Some day, when I am well established at Croydon, you shall go to Mudie’s, and make inquiry if my novels ever by any chance leave the shelves, and then you shall give me a true and faithful report of the answer you get. “He is quite forgotten,” the attendant will say; be sure of it.’

‘I think not.’

‘To have had even a small reputation, and to have outlived it, is a sort of anticipation of death. The man Edwin Reardon, whose name was sometimes spoken in a tone of interest, is really and actually dead. And what remains of me is resigned to that. I have an odd fancy that it will make death itself easier; it is as if only half of me had now to die.’

Biffen tried to give a lighter turn to the gloomy subject.

‘Thinking of my fiery adventure,’ he said, in his tone of dry deliberation, ‘I find it vastly amusing to picture you as a witness at the inquest if I had been choked and consumed. No

doubt it would have been made known that I rushed upstairs to save some particular piece of property—several people heard me say so—and you alone would be able to conjecture what this was. Imagine the gaping wonderment of the coroner's jury! The *Daily Telegraph* would have made a leader out of me. "This poor man was so strangely deluded as to the value of a novel in manuscript which it appears he had just completed, that he positively sacrificed his life in the endeavour to rescue it from the flames." And the *Saturday* would have had a column of sneering jocosity on the irrepressibly sanguine temperament of authors. At all events, I should have had my day of fame.'

'But what an ignoble death it would have been!' he pursued. 'Perishing in the garret of a lodging-house which caught fire by the overturning of a drunkard's lamp! One would like to end otherwise.'

'Where would you wish to die?' asked Reardon, musingly.

'At home,' replied the other, with pathetic emphasis. 'I have never had a home since I was a boy, and am never likely to have one. But to die at home is an unreasoning hope I still cherish.'

‘If you had never come to London, what would you have now been?’

‘Almost certainly a schoolmaster in some small town. And one might be worse off than that, you know.’

‘Yes, one might live peaceably enough in such a position. And I—I should be in an estate-agent’s office, earning a sufficient salary, and most likely married to some unambitious country girl. I should have lived an intelligible life, instead of only trying to live, aiming at modes of life beyond my reach. My mistake was that of numberless men nowadays. Because I was conscious of brains, I thought that the only place for me was London. It’s easy enough to understand this common delusion. We form our ideas of London from old literature; we think of London as if it were still the one centre of intellectual life; we think and talk like Chatterton. But the truth is that intellectual men in our day do their best to keep away from London—when once they know the place. There are libraries everywhere; papers and magazines reach the north of Scotland as soon as they reach Brompton; it’s only on rare occasions, for special kinds of work, that one is bound to live in London. And as for recreation,

why, now that no English theatre exists, what is there in London that you can't enjoy in almost any part of England? At all events, a yearly visit of a week would be quite sufficient for all the special features of the town. London is only a huge shop, with an hotel on the upper storeys. To be sure, if you make it your artistic subject, that's a different thing. But neither you nor I would do that by deliberate choice.'

'I think not.'

'It's a huge misfortune, this will-o'-the-wisp attraction exercised by London on young men of brains. They come here to be degraded, or to perish, when their true sphere is a life of peaceful remoteness. The type of man capable of success in London is more or less callous and cynical. If I had the training of boys, I would teach them to think of London as the last place where life can be lived worthily.'

'And the place where you are most likely to die in squalid wretchedness.'

'The one happy result of my experiences,' said Reardon, 'is that they have cured me of ambition. What a miserable fellow I should be if I were still possessed with the desire to make a name! I can't even recall very clearly that state of mind. My strongest desire now is for

peaceful obscurity. I am tired out ; I want to rest for the remainder of my life.'

'You won't have much rest at Croydon.'

'Oh, it isn't impossible. My time will be wholly occupied in a round of all but mechanical duties, and I think that will be the best medicine for my mind. I shall read very little, and that only in the classics. I don't say that I shall always be content in such a position ; in a few years perhaps something pleasanter will offer. But in the meantime it will do very well. Then there is our expedition to Greece to look forward to. I am quite in earnest about that. The year after next, if we are both alive, assuredly we go.'

'The year after next.' Biffen smiled dubiously.

'I have demonstrated to you mathematically that it is possible.'

'You have ; but so are a great many other things that one does not dare to hope for.'

Someone knocked at the door, opened it, and said :

'Here's a telegram for you, Mr. Reardon.'

The friends looked at each other, as if some fear had entered the minds of both. Reardon opened the despatch. It was from his wife, and ran thus :

‘Willie is ill of diphtheria. Please come to us at once. I am staying with Mrs. Carter at her mother’s, at Brighton.’

The full address was given.

‘You hadn’t heard of her going there?’ said Biffen when he had read the lines.

‘No. I haven’t seen Carter for several days, or perhaps he would have told me. Brighton, at this time of year? But I believe there’s a fashionable “season” about now, isn’t there? I suppose that would account for it.’

He spoke in a slighting tone, but showed increasing agitation.

‘Of course you will go?’

‘I must. Though I’m in no condition for making a journey.’

His friend examined him anxiously.

‘Are you feverish at all this evening?’

Reardon held out a hand that the other might feel his pulse. The beat was rapid to begin with, and had been heightened since the arrival of the telegram.

‘But go I must. The poor little fellow has no great place in my heart, but, when Amy sends for me, I must go. Perhaps things are at the worst.’

‘When is there a train? Have you a timetable?’

Biffen was despatched to the nearest shop to purchase one, and in the meanwhile Reardon packed a few necessities in a small travelling-bag, ancient and worn, but the object of his affection because it had accompanied him on his wanderings in the South. When Harold returned, his appearance excited Reardon’s astonishment—he was white from head to foot.

‘Snow?’

‘It must have been falling heavily for an hour or more.’

‘Can’t be helped ; I must go.’

The nearest station for departure was London Bridge, and the next train left at 7.20. By Reardon’s watch it was now about five minutes to seven.

‘I don’t know whether it’s possible,’ he said, in confused hurry, ‘but I must try. There isn’t another train till ten past nine. Come with me to the station, Biffen.’

Both were ready. They rushed from the house, and sped through the soft, steady fall of snowflakes into Upper Street. Here they were several minutes before they found a disengaged cab. Questioning the driver, they learnt what

they would have known very well already but for their excitement: impossible to get to London Bridge Station in a quarter of an hour.

‘Better to go on, all the same,’ was Reardon’s opinion. ‘If the snow gets deep I shall perhaps not be able to have a cab at all. But you had better not come; I forgot that you are as much out of sorts as I am.’

‘How can you wait a couple of hours alone? In with you!’

‘Diphtheria is pretty sure to be fatal to a child of that age, isn’t it?’ Reardon asked when they were speeding along City Road.

‘I’m afraid there’s much danger.’

‘Why did she send?’

‘What an absurd question! You seem to have got into a thoroughly morbid state of mind about her. Do be human, and put away your obstinate folly.’

‘In my position you would have acted precisely as I have done. I have had no choice.’

‘I might; but we have both of us too little practicality. The art of living is the art of compromise. We have no right to foster sensibilities, and conduct ourselves as if the world allowed of ideal relations; it leads to misery for others as well as ourselves. Genial coarse-

ness is what it behoves men like you and me to cultivate. Your reply to your wife's last letter was preposterous. You ought to have gone to her of your own accord as soon as ever you heard she was rich ; she would have thanked you for such common-sense disregard of delicacies. Let there be an end of this nonsense, I implore you !'

Reardon stared through the glass at the snow that fell thicker and thicker.

'What are we—you and I?' pursued the other. 'We have no belief in immortality ; we are convinced that this life is all ; we know that human happiness is the origin and end of all moral considerations. What right have we to make ourselves and others miserable for the sake of an obstinate idealism ? It is our duty to make the best of circumstances. Why will you go cutting your loaf with a razor when you have a serviceable bread-knife ?'

Still Reardon did not speak. The cab rolled on almost silently.

'You love your wife, and this summons she sends is proof that her thought turns to you as soon as she is in distress.'

'Perhaps she only thought it her duty to let the child's father know——'

‘Perhaps—perhaps—perhaps!’ cried Biffen, contemptuously. ‘There goes the razor again! Take the plain, human construction of what happens. Ask yourself what the vulgar man would do, and do likewise; that’s the only safe rule for you.’

They were both hoarse with too much talking, and for the last half of the drive neither spoke.

At the railway-station they ate and drank together, but with poor pretence of appetite. As long as possible they kept within the warmed rooms. Reardon was pale, and had anxious, restless eyes; he could not remain seated, though when he had walked about for a few minutes the trembling of his limbs obliged him to sink down. It was an unutterable relief to both when the moment of the train’s starting approached.

They clasped hands warmly, and exchanged a few last requests and promises.

‘Forgive my plain speech, old fellow,’ said Biffen. ‘Go and be happy!’

Then he stood alone on the platform, watching the red light on the last carriage as the train whirled away into darkness and storm.

CHAPTER XXXII

REARDON BECOMES PRACTICAL

REARDON had never been to Brighton, and of his own accord never would have gone; he was prejudiced against the place because its name has become suggestive of fashionable imbecility and the snobbishness which tries to model itself thereon; he knew that the town was a mere portion of London transferred to the sea-shore, and as he loved the strand and the breakers for their own sake, to think of them in such connection could be nothing but a trial of his temper. Something of this species of irritation affected him in the first part of his journey, and disturbed the mood of kindness with which he was approaching Amy; but towards the end he forgot this in a growing desire to be beside his wife in her trouble. His impatience made the hour and a half seem interminable.

The fever which was upon him had increased. He coughed frequently; his breathing

was difficult; though constantly moving, he felt as if, in the absence of excitement, his one wish would have been to lie down and abandon himself to lethargy. Two men who sat with him in the third-class carriage had spread a rug over their knees and amused themselves with playing cards for trifling sums of money; the sight of their foolish faces, the sound of their laughs, the talk they interchanged, exasperated him to the last point of endurance, but for all that he could not draw his attention from them. He seemed condemned by some spiritual tormentor to take an interest in their endless games, and to observe their visages until he knew every line with a hateful intimacy. One of the men had a moustache of unusual form; the ends curved upward with peculiar suddenness, and Reardon was constrained to speculate as to the mode of training by which this singularity had been produced. He could have shed tears of nervous distraction in his inability to turn his thoughts upon other things.

On alighting at his journey's end he was seized with a fit of shivering, an intense and sudden chill which made his teeth chatter. In an endeavour to overcome this he began to run towards the row of cabs, but his legs refused

such exercise, and coughing compelled him to pause for breath. Still shaking, he threw himself into a vehicle and was driven to the address Amy had mentioned. The snow on the ground lay thick, but no more was falling.

Heedless of the direction which the cab took, he suffered his physical and mental unrest for another quarter of an hour, then a stoppage told him that the house was reached. On his way he had heard a clock strike eleven.

The door opened almost as soon as he had rung the bell. He mentioned his name, and the maid-servant conducted him to a drawing-room on the ground-floor. The house was quite a small one, but seemed to be well furnished. One lamp burned on the table, and the fire had sunk to a red glow. Saying that she would inform Mrs. Reardon at once, the servant left him alone.

He placed his bag on the floor, took off his muffler, threw back his overcoat, and sat waiting. The overcoat was new, but the garments beneath it were his poorest, those he wore when sitting in his garret, for he had neither had time to change them, nor thought of doing so.

He heard no approaching footstep, but Amy came into the room in a way which showed that she had hastened downstairs. She looked at

him, then drew near with both hands extended, and laid them on his shoulders, and kissed him. Reardon shook so violently that it was all he could do to remain standing; he seized one of her hands, and pressed it against his lips.

‘How hot your breath is!’ she said. ‘And how you tremble! Are you ill?’

‘A bad cold, that’s all,’ he answered thickly, and coughed. ‘How is Willie?’

‘In great danger. The doctor is coming again to-night; we thought that was his ring.’

‘You didn’t expect me to-night?’

‘I couldn’t feel sure whether you would come.’

‘Why did you send for me, Amy? Because Willie was in danger, and you felt I ought to know about it?’

‘Yes—and because I——’

She burst into tears. The display of emotion came very suddenly; her words had been spoken in a firm voice, and only the pained knitting of her brows had told what she was suffering.

‘If Willie dies, what shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?’ broke forth between her sobs.

Reardon took her in his arms, and laid his hand upon her head in the old loving way.

‘Do you wish me to go up and see him, Amy?’

‘Of course. But first, let me tell you why we are here. Edith—Mrs. Carter—was coming to spend a week with her mother, and she pressed me to join her. I didn’t really wish to; I was unhappy, and felt how impossible it was to go on always living away from you. Oh, that I had never come! Then Willie would have been as well as ever.’

‘Tell me when and how it began.’

She explained briefly, then went on to tell of other circumstances.

‘I have a nurse with me in the room. It’s my own bedroom, and this house is so small it will be impossible to give you a bed here, Edwin. But there’s an hotel only a few yards away.’

‘Yes, yes; don’t trouble about that.’

‘But you look so ill—you are shaking so. Is it a cold you have had long?’

‘Oh, my old habit; you remember. One cold after another, all through the accursed winter. What does that matter when you speak kindly to me once more? I had rather die now at your feet and see the old gentleness when you look at me, than live on estranged

from you. No, don't kiss me, I believe these vile sore-throats are contagious.'

'But your lips are so hot and parched! And to think of your coming this journey, on such a night!'

'Good old Biffen came to the station with me. He was angry because I had kept away from you so long. Have you given me your heart again, Amy?'

'Oh, it has all been a wretched mistake! But we were so poor. Now all that is over; if only Willie can be saved to me! I am so anxious for the doctor's coming; the poor little child can hardly draw a breath. How cruel it is that such suffering should come upon a little creature who has never done or thought ill!'

'You are not the first, dearest, who has revolted against nature's cruelty.'

'Let us go up at once, Edwin. Leave your coat and things here. Mrs. Winter—Edith's mother—is a very old lady; she has gone to bed. And I dare say you wouldn't care to see Mrs. Carter to-night?'

'No, no! only you and Willie.'

'When the doctor comes hadn't you better ask his advice for yourself?'

'We shall see. Don't trouble about me.'

They went softly up to the first floor, and entered a bedroom. Fortunately the light here was very dim, or the nurse who sat by the child's bed must have wondered at the eccentricity with which her patient's father attired himself. Bending over the little sufferer, Reardon felt for the first time since Willie's birth a strong fatherly emotion; tears rushed to his eyes, and he almost crushed Amy's hand as he held it during the spasm of his intense feeling.

He sat here for a long time without speaking. The warmth of the chamber had the reverse of an assuaging effect upon his difficult breathing and his frequent short cough—it seemed to oppress and confuse his brain. He began to feel a pain in his right side, and could not sit upright on the chair.

Amy kept regarding him, without his being aware of it.

‘Does your head ache?’ she whispered.

He nodded, but did not speak.

‘Oh, why doesn't the doctor come? I must send in a few minutes.’

But as soon as she had spoken a bell rang in the lower part of the house. Amy had no doubt that it announced the promised visit. She left the room, and in a minute or two re-

turned with the medical man. When the examination of the child was over, Reardon requested a few words with the doctor in the room downstairs.

‘I’ll come back to you,’ he whispered to Amy. .

The two descended together, and entered the drawing-room.

‘Is there any hope for the little fellow?’ Reardon asked.

Yes, there was hope; a favourable turn might be expected.

‘Now I wish to trouble you for a moment on my own account. I shouldn’t be surprised if you tell me that I have congestion of the lungs.’

The doctor, a suave man of fifty, had been inspecting his interlocutor with curiosity. He now asked the necessary questions, and made an examination.

‘Have you had any lung trouble before this?’ he inquired gravely.

‘Slight congestion of the right lung not many weeks ago.’

‘I must order you to bed immediately. Why have you allowed your symptoms to go so far without——’

‘I have just come down from London,’ interrupted Reardon.

‘Tut, tut, tut! To bed this moment, my dear sir! There is inflammation, and——’

‘I can’t have a bed in this house; there is no spare room. I must go to the nearest hotel.’

‘Positively? Then let me take you. My carriage is at the door.’

‘One thing—I beg you won’t tell my wife that this is serious. Wait till she is out of her anxiety about the child.’

‘You will need the services of a nurse. A most unfortunate thing that you are obliged to go to the hotel.’

‘It can’t be helped. If a nurse is necessary, I must engage one.’

He had the strange sensation of knowing that whatever was needful could be paid for; it relieved his mind immensely. To the rich, illness has none of the worst horrors only understood by the poor.

‘Don’t speak a word more than you can help,’ said the doctor as he watched Reardon withdraw.

Amy stood on the lower stairs, and came down as soon as her husband showed himself.

‘The doctor is good enough to take me in his carriage,’ he whispered. ‘It is better that I

should go to bed, and get a good night's rest. I wish I could have sat with you, Amy.'

'Is it anything? You look worse than when you came, Edwin.'

'A feverish cold. Don't give it a thought, dearest. Go to Willie. Good-night!'

She threw her arms about him.

'I shall come to see you if you are not able to be here by nine in the morning,' she said, and added the name of the hotel to which he was to go.

At this establishment the doctor was well known. By midnight Reardon lay in a comfortable room, a huge cataplasm fixed upon him, and other needful arrangements made. A waiter had undertaken to visit him at intervals through the night, and the man of medicine promised to return as soon as possible after daybreak.

What sound was that, soft and continuous, remote, now clearer, now confusedly murmuring? He must have slept, but now he lay in sudden perfect consciousness, and that music fell upon his ears. Ah! of course it was the rising tide; he was near the divine sea.

The night-light enabled him to discern the principal objects in the room, and he let his

eyes stray idly hither and thither. But this moment of peacefulness was brought to an end by a fit of coughing, and he became troubled, profoundly troubled, in mind. Was his illness really dangerous? He tried to draw a deep breath, but could not. He found that he could only lie on his right side with any ease. And with the effort of turning he exhausted himself; in the course of an hour or two all his strength had left him. Vague fears flitted harassingly through his thoughts. If he had inflammation of the lungs—that was a disease of which one might die, and speedily. Death? No, no, no; impossible at such a time as this, when Amy, his own dear wife, had come back to him, and had brought him that which would insure their happiness through all the years of a long life.

He was still quite a young man; there must be great reserves of strength in him. And he had the will to live, the prevailing will, the passionate all-conquering desire of happiness.

How he had alarmed himself! Why, now he was calmer again, and again could listen to the music of the breakers. Not all the folly and baseness that paraded along this strip of the shore could change the sea's eternal melody. In a day or two he would walk on the sands

with Amy, somewhere quite out of sight of the repulsive town. But Willie was ill; he had forgotten that. Poor little boy! In future the child should be more to him; though never what the mother was, his own love, won again and for ever.

Again an interval of unconsciousness, brought to an end by that aching in his side. He breathed very quickly; could not help doing so. He had never felt so ill as this, never. Was it not near morning?

Then he dreamt. He was at Patras, was stepping into a boat to be rowed out to the steamer which would bear him away from Greece. A magnificent night, though at the end of December; a sky of deep blue, thick set with stars. No sound but the steady splash of the oars, or perhaps a voice from one of the many vessels that lay anchored in the harbour, each showing its lantern-gleams. The water was as deep a blue as the sky, and sparkled with reflected radiance.

And now he stood on deck in the light of early morning. Southward lay the Ionian Islands; he looked for Ithaca, and grieved that it

had been passed in the hours of darkness. But the nearest point of the main shore was a rocky promontory ; it reminded him that in these waters was fought the battle of Actium.

The glory vanished. He lay once more a sick man in a hired chamber, longing for the dull English dawn.

At eight o'clock came the doctor. He would allow only a word or two to be uttered, and his visit was brief. Reardon was chiefly anxious to have news of the child, but for this he would have to wait.

At ten Amy entered the bedroom. Reardon could not raise himself, but he stretched out his hand and took hers, and gazed eagerly at her. She must have been weeping, he felt sure of that, and there was an expression on her face such as he had never seen there.

‘How is Willie?’

‘Better, dear ; much better.’

He still searched her face.

‘Ought you to leave him?’

‘Hush ! You mustn’t speak.’

Tears broke from her eyes, and Reardon had the conviction that the child was dead.

‘The truth, Amy !’

She threw herself on her knees by the bedside, and pressed her wet cheek against his hand.

‘I am come to nurse you, dear husband,’ she said a moment after, standing up again and kissing his forehead. ‘I have only you now.’

His heart sank, and for a moment so great a terror was upon him that he closed his eyes and seemed to pass into utter darkness. But those last words of hers repeated themselves in his mind, and at length they brought a deep solace. Poor little Willie had been the cause of the first coldness between him and Amy; her love for him had given place to a mother’s love for the child. Now it would be as in the first days of their marriage; they would again be all in all to each other.

‘You oughtn’t to have come, feeling so ill,’ she said to him. ‘You should have let me know, dear.’

He smiled and kissed her hand.

‘And you kept the truth from me last night, in kindness.’

She checked herself, knowing that agitation must be harmful to him. She had hoped to conceal the child’s death, but the effort was too much for her overstrung nerves. And indeed it was only possible for her to remain an hour

or two by this sick bed, for she was exhausted by her night of watching, and the sudden agony with which it had concluded. Shortly after Amy's departure, a professional nurse came to attend upon what the doctor had privately characterised as a very grave case.

By the evening its gravity was in no respect diminished. The sufferer had ceased to cough and to make restless movements, and had become lethargic ; later, he spoke deliriously, or rather muttered, for his words were seldom intelligible. Amy had returned to the room at four o'clock, and remained till far into the night ; she was physically exhausted, and could do little but sit in a chair by the bedside and shed silent tears, or gaze at vacancy in the woe of her sudden desolation. Telegrams had been exchanged with her mother, who was to arrive in Brighton to-morrow morning ; the child's funeral would probably be on the third day from this.

When she rose to go away for the night, leaving the nurse in attendance, Reardon seemed to lie in a state of unconsciousness, but just as she was turning from the bed, he opened his eyes and pronounced her name.

'I am here, Edwin,' she answered, bending over him.

‘Will you let Biffen know?’ he said in low but very clear tones.

‘That you are ill, dear? I will write at once, or telegraph, if you like. What is his address?’

He had closed his eyes again, and there came no reply. Amy repeated her question twice; she was turning from him in hopelessness when his voice became audible.

‘I can’t remember his new address. I know it, but I can’t remember.’

She had to leave him thus.

The next day his breathing was so harassed that he had to be raised against pillows. But throughout the hours of daylight his mind was clear, and from time to time he whispered words of tenderness in reply to Amy’s look. He never willingly relinquished her hand, and repeatedly he pressed it against his cheek or lips. Vainly he still endeavoured to recall his friend’s address.

‘Couldn’t Mr. Carter discover it for you?’ Amy asked.

‘Perhaps. You might try.’

She would have suggested applying to Jasper Milvain, but that name must not be mentioned. Whelpdale, also, would perchance know where Biffen lived, but Whelpdale’s address he had also forgotten.

At night there were long periods of delirium; not mere confused muttering, but continuous talk which the listeners could follow perfectly.

For the most part the sufferer's mind was occupied with revival of the distress he had undergone whilst making those last efforts to write something worthy of himself. Amy's heart was wrung as she heard him living through that time of supreme misery—misery which she might have done so much to alleviate, had not selfish fears and irritated pride caused her to draw further and further from him. Hers was the kind of penitence which is forced by sheer stress of circumstances on a nature which resents any form of humiliation; she could not abandon herself to unreserved grief for what she had done or omitted, and the sense of this defect made a great part of her affliction. When her husband lay in mute lethargy, she thought only of her dead child, and mourned the loss; but his delirious utterances constrained her to break from that bitter-sweet preoccupation, to confuse her mourning with self-reproach and with fears.

Though unconsciously, he was addressing her: 'I can do no more, Amy. My brain seems to be worn out; I can't compose, I can't even

think. Look! I have been sitting here for hours, and I have done only that little bit, half a dozen lines. Such poor stuff too! I should burn it, only I can't afford. I *must* do my regular quantity every day, no matter what it is.'

The nurse, who was present when he talked in this way, looked to Amy for an explanation.

'My husband is an author,' Amy answered. 'Not long ago he was obliged to write when he was ill and ought to have been resting.'

'I always thought it must be hard work writing books,' said the nurse with a shake of her head.

'You don't understand me,' the voice pursued, dreadful as a voice always is when speaking independently of the will. 'You think I am only a poor creature, because I can do nothing better than this. If only I had money enough to rest for a year or two, you should see. Just because I have no money I must sink to this degradation. And I am losing you as well; you don't love me!'

He began to moan in anguish.

But a happy change presently came over his dreaming. He fell into animated description of his experiences in Greece and Italy, and after

talking for a long time, he turned his head and said in a perfectly natural tone :

‘Amy, do you know that Biffen and I are going to Greece?’

She believed he spoke consciously, and replied :

‘You must take me with you, Edwin.’

He paid no attention to this remark, but went on with the same deceptive accent.

‘He deserves a holiday after nearly getting burnt to death to save his novel. Imagine the old fellow plunging headlong into the flames to rescue his manuscript! Don’t say that authors can’t be heroic!’

And he laughed gaily.

Another morning broke. It was possible, said the doctors (a second had been summoned), that a crisis which drew near might bring the favourable turn; but Amy formed her own opinion from the way in which the nurse expressed herself. She felt sure that the gravest fears were entertained. Before noon Reardon awoke from what had seemed natural sleep—save for the rapid breathing—and of a sudden recollected the number of the house in Cleveland Street at which Biffen was now living. He uttered it without explanation. Amy at once

conjectured his meaning, and as soon as her surmise was confirmed she despatched a telegram to her husband's friend.

That evening, as Amy was on the point of returning to the sick-room after having dined at her friend's house, it was announced that a gentleman named Biffen wished to see her. She found him in the dining-room, and, even amid her distress, it was a satisfaction to her that he presented a far more conventional appearance than in the old days. All the garments he wore, even his hat, gloves, and boots, were new; a surprising state of things, explained by the fact of his commercial brother having sent him a present of ten pounds, a practical expression of sympathy with him in his recent calamity. Biffen could not speak; he looked with alarm at Amy's pallid face. In a few words she told him of Reardon's condition.

'I feared this,' he replied under his breath. 'He was ill when I saw him off at London Bridge. But Willie is better, I trust?'

Amy tried to answer, but tears filled her eyes and her head drooped. Harold was overcome with a sense of fatality; grief and dread held him motionless.

They conversed brokenly for a few minutes,

then left the house, Biffen carrying the hand-bag with which he had travelled hither. When they reached the hotel he waited apart until it was ascertained whether he could enter the sick-room. Amy rejoined him and said with a faint smile :

‘He is conscious, and was very glad to hear that you had come. But don’t let him try to speak much.’

The change that had come over his friend’s countenance was to Harold, of course, far more gravely impressive than to those who had watched at the bedside. In the drawn features, large sunken eyes, thin and discoloured lips, it seemed to him that he read too surely the presage of doom. After holding the shrunken hand for a moment he was convulsed with an agonising sob, and had to turn away.

Amy saw that her husband wished to speak to her ; she bent over him.

‘Ask him to stay, dear. Give him a room in the hotel.’

‘I will.’

Biffen sat down by the bedside, and remained for half an hour. His friend inquired whether he had yet heard about the novel ; the answer was a shake of the head. When he rose,

Reardon signed to him to bend down, and whispered :

‘ It doesn’t matter what happens ; she is mine again.’

The next day was very cold, but a blue sky gleamed over land and sea. The drives and promenades were thronged with people in exuberant health and spirits. Biffen regarded this spectacle with resentful scorn ; at another time it would have moved him merely to mirth, but not even the sound of the breakers when he had wandered as far as possible from human contact could help him to think with resignation of the injustice which triumphs so flagrantly in the destinies of men. Towards Amy he had no shadow of unkindness ; the sight of her in tears had impressed him as profoundly, in another way, as that of his friend’s wasted features. She and Reardon were again one, and his love for them both was stronger than any emotion of tenderness he had ever known.

In the afternoon he again sat by the bedside. Every symptom of the sufferer’s condition pointed to an approaching end : a face that had grown cadaverous, livid lips, breath drawn in hurrying gasps. Harold despaired of another look of recognition. But as he sat with his forehead

resting on his hand Amy touched him ; Reardon had turned his face in their direction, and with a conscious gaze.

‘I shall never go with you to Greece,’ he said distinctly.

There was silence again. Biffen did not move his eyes from the deathly mask ; in a minute or two he saw a smile soften its lineaments, and Reardon again spoke :

‘How often you and I have quoted it !—“We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our ——”’

The remaining words were indistinguishable, and, as if the effort of utterance had exhausted him, his eyes closed, and he sank into lethargy.

When he came down from his bedroom on the following morning, Biffen was informed that his friend had died between two and three o’clock. At the same time he received a note in which Amy requested him to come and see her late in the afternoon. He spent the day in a long walk along the eastward cliffs ; again the sun shone brilliantly, and the sea was flecked with foam upon its changing green and azure. It seemed to him that he had never before known

solitude, even through all the years of his lonely and sad existence.

At sunset he obeyed Amy's summons. He found her calm, but with the signs of long weeping.

'At the last moment,' she said, 'he was able to speak to me, and you were mentioned. He wished you to have all that he has left in his room at Islington. When I come back to London, will you take me there and let me see the room just as when he lived in it? Let the people in the house know what has happened, and that I am responsible for whatever will be owing.'

Her resolve to behave composedly gave way as soon as Harold's broken voice had replied. Hysterical sobbing made further speech from her impossible, and Biffen, after holding her hand reverently for a moment, left her alone.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE SUNNY WAY

ON an evening of early summer, six months after the death of Edwin Reardon, Jasper of the facile pen was bending over his desk, writing rapidly by the warm western light which told that sunset was near. Not far from him sat his younger sister; she was reading, and the book in her hand bore the title, 'Mr. Bailey, Grocer.'

'How will this do?' Jasper exclaimed, suddenly throwing down his pen.

And he read aloud a critical notice of the book with which Dora was occupied; a notice of the frankly eulogistic species, beginning with: 'It is seldom nowadays that the luckless reviewer of novels can draw the attention of the public to a new work which is at once powerful and original;' and ending: 'The word is a bold one, but we do not hesitate to pronounce this book a masterpiece.'

‘Is that for *The Current*?’ asked Dora, when he had finished.

‘No, for *The West End*. Fadge won’t allow any one but himself to be lauded in that style. I may as well do the notice for *The Current* now, as I’ve got my hand in.’

He turned to his desk again, and before daylight failed him had produced a piece of more cautious writing, very favourable on the whole, but with reserves and slight censures. This also he read to Dora.

‘You wouldn’t suspect they were written by the same man, eh?’

‘No. You have changed the style very skilfully.’

‘I doubt if they’ll be much use. Most people will fling the book down with yawns before they’re half through the first volume. If I knew a doctor who had many cases of insomnia in hand, I would recommend “Mr. Bailey” to him as a specific.’

‘Oh, but it is really clever, Jasper!’

‘Not a doubt of it. I half believe what I have written. And if only we could get it mentioned in a leader or two, and so on, old Biffen’s fame would be established with the better sort of readers. But he won’t sell three hundred

copies. I wonder whether Robertson would let me do a notice for his paper ?'

'Biffen ought to be grateful to you, if he knew,' said Dora, laughing.

'Yet, now, there are people who would cry out that this kind of thing is disgraceful. It's nothing of the kind. Speaking seriously, we know that a really good book will more likely than not receive fair treatment from two or three reviewers; yes, but also more likely than not it will be swamped in the flood of literature that pours forth week after week, and won't have attention fixed long enough upon it to establish its repute. The struggle for existence among books is nowadays as severe as among men. If a writer has friends connected with the press, it is the plain duty of those friends to do their utmost to help him. What matter if they exaggerate, or even lie? The simple, sober truth has no chance whatever of being listened to, and it's only by volume of shouting that the ear of the public is held. What use is it to Biffen if his work struggles to slow recognition ten years hence? Besides, as I say, the growing flood of literature swamps everything but works of primary genius. If a clever and conscientious book does not

spring to success at once, there's precious small chance that it will survive. Suppose it were possible for me to write a round dozen reviews of this book, in as many different papers, I would do it with satisfaction. Depend upon it, this kind of thing will be done on that scale before long. And it's quite natural. A man's friends must be helped, by whatever means, *quocunque modo*, as Biffen himself would say.'

'I dare say he doesn't even think of you as a friend now.'

'Very likely not. It's ages since I saw him. But there's much magnanimity in my character, as I have often told you. It delights me to be generous, whenever I can afford it.'

Dusk was gathering about them. As they sat talking, there came a tap at the door, and the summons to enter was obeyed by Mr. Whelpdale.

'I was passing,' he said in his respectful voice, 'and couldn't resist the temptation.'

Jasper struck a match and lit the lamp. In this clearer light Whelpdale was exhibited as a young man of greatly improved exterior; he wore a cream-coloured waistcoat, a necktie of subtle hue, and delicate gloves; prosperity breathed from his whole person. It was, in fact,

only a moderate prosperity to which he had as yet attained, but the future beckoned to him flatteringly. Early in this year, his enterprise as 'literary adviser' had brought him in contact with a man of some pecuniary resources, who proposed to establish an agency for the convenience of authors who were not skilled in disposing of their productions to the best advantage. Under the name of Fleet & Co., this business was shortly set on foot, and Whelpdale's services were retained on satisfactory terms. The birth of the syndicate system had given new scope to literary agencies, and Mr. Fleet was a man of keen eye for commercial opportunities.

'Well, have you read Biffen's book?' asked Jasper.

'Wonderful, isn't it? A work of genius, I am convinced. Ha! you have it there, Miss Dora. But I'm afraid it is hardly for you.'

'And why not, Mr. Whelpdale?'

'You should only read of beautiful things, of happy lives. This book must depress you.'

'But why *will* you imagine me such a feeble-minded person?' asked Dora. 'You have so often spoken like this. I have really no ambition to be a doll of such superfine wax.'

The habitual flatterer looked deeply concerned.

‘Pray forgive me!’ he murmured humbly, leaning forwards towards the girl with eyes which deprecated her displeasure. ‘I am very far indeed from attributing weakness to you. It was only the natural, unreflecting impulse; one finds it so difficult to associate you, even as merely a reader, with such squalid scenes. The ignobly decent, as poor Biffen calls it, is so very far from that sphere in which you are naturally at home.’

There was some slight affectation in his language, but the tone attested sincere feeling. Jasper was watching him with half an eye, and glancing occasionally at Dora.

‘No doubt,’ said the latter, ‘it’s my story in *The English Girl* that inclines you to think me a goody-goody sort of young woman.’

‘So far from that, Miss Dora, I was only waiting for an opportunity to tell you how exceedingly delighted I have been with the last two weeks’ instalments. In all seriousness, I consider that story of yours the best thing of the kind that ever came under my notice. You seem to me to have discovered a new *genre*; such writing as this has surely never been offered

to girls, and all the readers of the paper must be immensely grateful to you. I run eagerly to buy the paper each week; I assure you I do. The stationer thinks I purchase it for a sister, I suppose. But each section of the story seems to be better than the last. Mark the prophecy which I now make: when this tale is published in a volume its success will be great. You will be recognised, Miss Dora, as the new writer for modern English girls.'

The subject of this panegyric coloured a little and laughed. Unmistakably she was pleased.

'Look here, Whelpdale,' said Jasper, 'I can't have this; Dora's conceit, please to remember, is, to begin with, only a little less than my own, and you will make her unendurable. Her tale is well enough in its way, but then its way is a very humble one.'

'I deny it!' cried the other, excitedly. 'How can it be called a humble line of work to provide reading, which is at once intellectual and moving and exquisitely pure, for the most important part of the population—the educated and refined young people who are just passing from girlhood to womanhood?'

'The most important fiddlestick!'

‘You are grossly irreverent, my dear Milvain. I cannot appeal to your sister, for she’s too modest to rate her own sex at its true value, but the vast majority of thoughtful men would support me. You yourself do, though you affect this profane way of speaking. And we know,’ he looked at Dora, ‘that he wouldn’t talk like this if Miss Yule were present.’

Jasper changed the topic of conversation, and presently Whelpdale was able to talk with more calmness. The young man, since his association with Fleet & Co., had become fertile in suggestions of literary enterprise, and at present he was occupied with a project of special hopefulness.

‘I want to find a capitalist,’ he said, ‘who will get possession of that paper *Chat*, and transform it according to an idea I have in my head. The thing is doing very indifferently, but I am convinced it might be made splendid property, with a few changes in the way of conducting it.’

‘The paper is rubbish,’ remarked Jasper, ‘and the kind of rubbish—oddly enough—which doesn’t attract people.’

‘Precisely, but the rubbish is capable of being made a very valuable article, if it were only handled properly. I have talked to the

people about it again and again, but I can't get them to believe what I say. Now just listen to my notion. In the first place, I should slightly alter the name; only slightly, but that little alteration would in itself have an enormous effect. Instead of *Chat*, I should call it *Chit-Chat!*'

Jasper exploded with mirth.

'That's brilliant!' he cried. 'A stroke of genius!'

'Are you serious? Or, are you making fun of me? I believe it *is* a stroke of genius. *Chat* doesn't attract any one, but *Chit-Chat* would sell like hot cakes, as they say in America. I know I am right; laugh as you will.'

'On the same principle,' cried Jasper, 'if *The Tatler* were changed to *Tittle-Tattle*, its circulation would be trebled.'

Whelpdale smote his knee in delight.

'An admirable idea! Many a true word uttered in joke, and this is an instance! *Tittle-Tattle*—a magnificent title; the very thing to catch the multitude.'

Dora was joining in the merriment, and for a minute or two nothing but bursts of laughter could be heard.

'Now do let me go on,' implored the man

of projects, when the noise subsided. 'That's only one change, though a most important one. What I next propose is this:—I know you will laugh again, but I will demonstrate to you that I am right. No article in the paper is to measure more than two inches in length, and every inch must be broken into at least two paragraphs.'

'Superb!'

'But you are joking, Mr. Whelpdale?' exclaimed Dora.

'No, I am perfectly serious. Let me explain my principle. I would have the paper address itself to the quarter-educated; that is to say, the great new generation that is being turned out by the Board schools, the young men and women who can just read, but are incapable of sustained attention. People of this kind want something to occupy them in trains, and on 'buses and trams. As a rule they care for no newspapers except the Sunday ones; what they want is the lightest and frothiest of chit-chatty information—bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics, bits of foolery. Am I not right? Everything must be very short, two inches at the utmost; their attention can't sustain itself beyond two

inches. Even chat is too solid for them : they want chit-chat.'

Jasper had begun to listen seriously.

'There's something in this, Whelpdale,' he remarked.

'Ha ! I have caught you ?' cried the other delightedly. 'Of course there's something in it !'

'But——' began Dora, and checked herself.

'You were going to say——' Whelpdale bent towards her with deference.

'Surely these poor, silly people oughtn't to be encouraged in their weakness.'

Whelpdale's countenance fell. He looked ashamed of himself. But Jasper came speedily to the rescue.

'That's twaddle; Dora. Fools will be fools to the world's end. Answer a fool according to his folly; supply a simpleton with the reading he craves, if it will put money in your pocket. You have discouraged poor Whelpdale in one of the most notable projects of modern times.'

'I shall think no more of it,' said Whelpdale, gravely. 'You are right, Miss Dora.'

Again Jasper burst into merriment. His sister reddened, and looked uncomfortable. She began to speak timidly :

‘You said this was for reading in trains and buses?’

Whelpdale caught at hope.

‘Yes. And really, you know, it may be better at such times to read chit-chat than to be altogether vacant, or to talk unprofitably. I am not sure; I bow to your opinion unservedly.’

‘So long as they only read the paper at such times,’ said Dora, still hesitating. ‘One knows by experience that one really can’t fix one’s attention in travelling; even an article in a newspaper is often too long.’

‘Exactly! And if *you* find it so, what must be the case with the mass of untaught people, the quarter-educated. It *might* encourage in some of them a taste for reading—don’t you think?’

‘It might,’ assented Dora, musingly. ‘And in that case you would be doing good!’

‘Distinct good!’

They smiled joyfully at each other. Then Whelpdale turned to Jasper:

‘You are convinced that there is something in this?’

‘Seriously, I think there is. It would all depend on the skill of the fellows who put the

thing together every week. There ought always to be one strongly sensational item—we won't call it article. For instance, you might display on a placard: "What the Queen eats!" or, "How Gladstone's collars are made!"—things of that kind.'

'To be sure, to be sure. And then, you know,' added Whelpdale, glancing anxiously at Dora, 'when people had been attracted by these devices, they would find a few things that were really profitable. We would give nicely written little accounts of exemplary careers, of heroic deeds, and so on. Of course nothing whatever that could be really demoralising—*cela va sans dire*. Well, what I was going to say was this: would you come with me to the office of *Chat*, and have a talk with my friend Lake, the sub-editor? I know your time is very valuable, but then you're often running into the *Will-o'-the-Wisp*, and *Chat* is just upstairs, you know.'

'What use should I be?'

'Oh, all the use in the world. Lake would pay most respectful attention to your opinion, though he thinks so little of mine. You are a man of note, I am nobody. I feel convinced that you could persuade the *Chat* people to adopt my idea, and they might be willing to

give me a contingent share of contingent profits, if I had really shown them the way to a good thing.'

Jasper promised to think the matter over. Whilst their talk still ran on this subject, a packet that had come by post was brought into the room. Opening it, Milvain exclaimed:

'Ha! this is lucky. There's something here that may interest you, Whelpdale.'

'Proofs?'

'Yes. A paper I have written for *The Wayside*.' He looked at Dora, who smiled. 'How do you like the title?—"The Novels of Edwin Reardon!"'

'You don't say so!' cried the other. 'What a good-hearted fellow you are, Milvain! Now that's really a kind thing to have done. By Jove! I must shake hands with you; I must indeed! Poor Reardon! Poor old fellow!'

His eyes gleamed with moisture. Dora, observing this, looked at him so gently and sweetly that it was perhaps well he did not meet her eyes; the experience would have been altogether too much for him.

'It has been written for three months,' said Jasper, 'but we have held it over for a practical reason. When I was engaged upon it, I went

to see Mortimer, and asked him if there was any chance of a new edition of Reardon's books. He had no idea the poor fellow was dead, and the news seemed really to affect him. He promised to consider whether it would be worth while trying a new issue, and before long I heard from him that he would bring out the two best books with a decent cover and so on, provided I could get my article on Reardon into one of the monthlies. This was soon settled. The editor of *The Wayside* answered at once, when I wrote to him, that he should be very glad to print what I proposed, as he had a real respect for Reardon. Next month the books will be out—"Neutral Ground," and "Hubert Reed." Mortimer said he was sure these were the only ones that would pay for themselves. But we shall see. He may alter his opinion when my article has been read.'

'Read it to us now, Jasper, will you?' asked Dora.

The request was supported by Whelpdale, and Jasper needed no pressing. He seated himself so that the lamp-light fell upon the pages, and read the article through. It was an excellent piece of writing (see *The Wayside*, June 1884), and in places touched with true emotion.

Any intelligent reader would divine that the author had been personally acquainted with the man of whom he wrote, though the fact was nowhere stated. The praise was not exaggerated, yet all the best points of Reardon's work were admirably brought out. One who knew Jasper might reasonably have doubted, before reading this, whether he was capable of so worthily appreciating the nobler man.

'I never understood Reardon so well before,' declared Whelpdale, at the close. 'This is a good thing well done. It's something to be proud of, Miss Dora.'

'Yes, I feel that it is,' she replied.

'Mrs. Reardon ought to be very grateful to you, Milvain. By-the-by, do you ever see her?'

'I have met her only once since his death—by chance.'

'Of course she will marry again. I wonder who'll be the fortunate man?'

'Fortunate, do you think?' asked Dora quietly, without looking at him.

'Oh, I spoke rather cynically, I'm afraid,' Whelpdale hastened to reply. 'I was thinking of her money. Indeed, I knew Mrs. Reardon only very slightly.'

‘I don’t think you need regret it,’ Dora remarked.

‘Oh well, come, come!’ put in her brother. ‘We know very well that there was little enough blame on her side.’

‘There was *great* blame!’ Dora exclaimed. ‘She behaved shamefully! I wouldn’t speak to her; I wouldn’t sit down in her company!’

‘Bosh! What do you know about it? Wait till you are married to a man like Reardon, and reduced to utter penury.’

‘Whoever my husband was, I would stand by him, if I starved to death!’

‘If he ill-used you?’

‘I am not talking of such cases. Mrs. Reardon had never anything of the kind to fear. It was impossible for a man such as her husband to behave harshly. Her conduct was cowardly, faithless, unwomanly!’

‘Trust one woman for thinking the worst of another,’ observed Jasper with something like a sneer.

Dora gave him a look of strong disapproval; one might have suspected that brother and sister had before this fallen into disagreement on the delicate topic. Whelpdale felt obliged

to interpose, and had of course no choice but to support the girl.

‘I can only say,’ he remarked with a smile, ‘that Miss Dora takes a very noble point of view. One feels that a wife ought to be staunch. But it’s so very unsafe to discuss matters in which one cannot know all the facts.’

‘We know quite enough of the facts,’ said Dora, with delightful pertinacity.

‘Indeed, perhaps we do,’ assented her slave. Then, turning to her brother, ‘Well, once more I congratulate you. I shall talk of your article incessantly, as soon as it appears. And I shall pester every one of my acquaintances to buy Reardon’s books—though it’s no use to him, poor fellow. Still, he would have died more contentedly if he could have foreseen this. By-the-by, Biffen will be profoundly grateful to you, I’m sure.’

‘I’m doing what I can for him, too. Run your eye over these slips.’

Whelpdale exhausted himself in terms of satisfaction.

‘You deserve to get on, my dear fellow. In a few years you will be the Aristarchus of our literary world.’

When the visitor rose to depart, Jasper said

he would walk a short distance with him. As soon as they had left the house, the future Aristarchus made a confidential communication.

‘It may interest you to know that my sister Maud is shortly to be married.’

‘Indeed! May I ask to whom?’

‘A man you don’t know. His name is Dolomore—a fellow in society.’

‘Rich, then, I hope?’

‘Tolerably well-to-do. I dare say he has three or four thousand a year!’

‘Gracious heavens! Why, that’s magnificent.’

But Whelpdale did not look quite so much satisfaction as his words expressed.

‘Is it to be soon?’ he inquired.

‘At the end of the season. Make no difference to Dora and me, of course.’

‘Oh? Really? No difference at all? You will let me come and see you—both—just in the old way, Milvain?’

‘Why the deuce shouldn’t you?’

‘To be sure, to be sure. By Jove! I really don’t know how I should get on if I couldn’t look in of an evening now and then. I have got so much into the habit of it. And—I’m a

lonely beggar, you know. I don't go into society, and really——'

He broke off, and Jasper began to speak of other things.

When Milvain re-entered the house, Dora had gone to her own sitting-room. It was not quite ten o'clock. Taking one set of the proofs of his 'Reardon' article, he put it into a large envelope; then he wrote a short letter, which began 'Dear Mrs. Reardon,' and ended 'Very sincerely yours,' the communication itself being as follows:

'I venture to send you the proofs of a paper which is to appear in next month's *Wayside*, in the hope that it may seem to you not badly done, and that the reading of it may give you pleasure. If anything occurs to you which you would like me to add, or if you desire any omission, will you do me the kindness to let me know of it as soon as possible, and your suggestion shall at once be adopted. I am informed that the new edition of "On Neutral Ground" and "Hubert Reed" will be ready next month. Need I say how glad I am that my friend's work is not to be forgotten?'

This note he also put into the envelope, which he made ready for posting. Then he sat for a long time in profound thought.

Shortly after eleven his door opened, and Maud came in. She had been dining at Mrs. Lane's. Her attire was still simple, but of quality which would have signified recklessness, but for the outlook whereof Jasper spoke to Whelpdale. The girl looked very beautiful. There was a flush of health and happiness on her cheek, and when she spoke it was in a voice that rang quite differently from her tones of a year ago; the pride which was natural to her had now a firm support; she moved and uttered herself in queenly fashion.

‘Has anyone been?’ she asked.

‘Whelpdale.’

‘Oh! I wanted to ask you, Jasper: do you think it wise to let him come quite so often?’

‘There’s a difficulty, you see. I can hardly tell him to sheer off. And he’s really a decent fellow.’

‘That may be. But—I think it’s rather unwise. Things are changed. In a few months, Dora will be a good deal at my house, and will see all sorts of people.’

‘Yes; but what if they are the kind of people she doesn’t care anything about? You must remember, old girl, that her tastes are quite dif-

ferent from yours. I say nothing, but—perhaps it's as well they should be.'

'You say nothing, but you add an insult,' returned Maud, with a smile of superb disregard. 'We won't reopen the question.'

'Oh dear no! And, by-the-by, I have a letter from Dolomore. It came just after you left.'

'Well?'

'He is quite willing to settle upon you a third of his income from the collieries; he tells me it will represent between seven and eight hundred a year. I think it rather little, you know; but I congratulate myself on having got this out of him.'

'Don't speak in that unpleasant way! It was only your abruptness that made any kind of difficulty.'

'I have my own opinion on that point, and I shall beg leave to keep it. Probably he will think me still more abrupt when I request, as I am now going to do, an interview with his solicitors.'

'Is that allowable?' asked Maud, anxiously. 'Can you do that with any decency?'

'If not, then I must do it with indecency. You will have the goodness to remember that if I don't look after your interests, no one else will.'

It's perhaps fortunate for you that I have a good deal of the man of business about me. Dolomore thought I was a dreamy, literary fellow. I don't say that he isn't entirely honest, but he shows something of a disposition to play the autocrat, and I by no means intend to let him. If you had a father, Dolomore would have to submit his affairs to examination. I stand to you *in loco parentis*, and I shall bate no jot of my rights.'

'But you can't say that his behaviour hasn't been perfectly straightforward.'

'I don't wish to. I think, on the whole, he has behaved more honourably than was to be expected of a man of his kind. But he must treat *me* with respect. My position in the world is greatly superior to his. And, by the gods! I will be treated respectfully! It wouldn't be amiss, Maud, if you just gave him a hint to that effect.'

'All I have to say is, Jasper, don't do me an irreparable injury. You might, without meaning it.'

'No fear whatever of it. I can behave as a gentleman, and I only expect Dolomore to do the same.'

Their conversation lasted for a long time, and

when he was again left alone Jasper again fell into a mood of thoughtfulness.

By a late post on the following day he received this letter :

‘DEAR MR. MILVAIN,—I have received the proofs, and have just read them ; I hasten to thank you with all my heart. No suggestion of mine could possibly improve this article ; it seems to me perfect in taste, in style, in matter. No one but you could have written this, for no one else understood Edwin so well, or had given such thought to his work. If he could but have known that such justice would be done to his memory ! But he died believing that already he was utterly forgotten, that his books would never again be publicly spoken of. This was a cruel fate. I have shed tears over what you have written, but they were not only tears of bitterness ; it cannot but be a consolation to me to think that, when the magazine appears, so many people will talk of Edwin and his books. I am deeply grateful to Mr. Mortimer for having undertaken to republish those two novels ; if you have an opportunity, will you do me the great kindness to thank him on my behalf ? At the same time, I must remember that it was you who first spoke to him on this subject. You say

that it gladdens you to think Edwin will not be forgotten, and I am very sure that the friendly office you have so admirably performed will in itself reward you more than any poor expression of gratitude from me. I write hurriedly, anxious to let you hear as soon as possible.

‘ Believe me, dear Mr. Milvain,

‘ Yours sincerely,

‘ AMY REARDON.’

CHAPTER XXXIV

A CHECK

MARIAN was at work as usual in the Reading-room. She did her best, during the hours spent here, to convert herself into the literary machine which it was her hope would some day be invented for construction in a less sensitive material than human tissue. Her eyes seldom strayed beyond the limits of the desk ; and if she had occasion to rise and go to the reference shelves, she looked at no one on the way. Yet she herself was occasionally an object of interested regard. Several readers were acquainted with the chief facts of her position ; they knew that her father was now incapable of work, and was waiting till his diseased eyes should be ready for the operator ; it was surmised, moreover, that a good deal depended upon the girl's literary exertions. Mr. Quarmby and his gossips naturally took the darkest view of things ; they were convinced that Alfred Yule could never recover his

sight, and they had a dolorous satisfaction in relating the story of Marian's legacy. Of her relations with Jasper Milvain none of these persons had heard; Yule had never spoken of that matter to any one of his friends.

Jasper had to look in this morning for a hurried consultation of certain encyclopædic volumes, and it chanced that Marian was standing before the shelves to which his business led him. He saw her from a little distance, and paused; it seemed as if he would turn back; for a moment he wore a look of doubt and worry. But after all he proceeded. At the sound of his 'Good-morning,' Marian started—she was standing with an open book in hand—and looked up with a gleam of joy on her face.

'I wanted to see you to-day,' she said, subduing her voice to the tone of ordinary conversation. 'I should have come this evening.'

'You wouldn't have found me at home. From five to seven I shall be frantically busy, and then I have to rush off to dine with some people.'

'I couldn't see you before five?'

'Is it something important?'

'Yes, it is.'

'I tell you what. If you could meet me at

Gloucester Gate at four, then I shall be glad of half an hour in the park. But I mustn't talk now; I'm driven to my wits' end. Gloucester Gate, at four sharp. I don't think it'll rain.'

He dragged out a tome of the 'Britannica.' Marian nodded, and returned to her seat.

At the appointed hour she was waiting near the entrance of Regent's Park which Jasper had mentioned. Not long ago there had fallen a light shower, but the sky was clear again. At five minutes past four she still waited, and had begun to fear that the passing rain might have led Jasper to think she would not come. Another five minutes, and from a hansom that rattled hither at full speed, the familiar figure alighted.

'Do forgive me!' he exclaimed. 'I couldn't possibly get here before. Let us go to the right.'

They betook themselves to that tree-shadowed strip of the park which skirts the canal.

'I'm so afraid that you haven't really time,' said Marian, who was chilled and confused by this show of hurry. She regretted having made the appointment; it would have been much better to postpone what she had to say until Jasper was at leisure. Yet nowadays the hours of leisure seemed to come so rarely.

‘If I get home at five, it’ll be all right,’ he replied. ‘What have you to tell me, Marian?’

‘We have heard about the money, at last.’

‘Oh?’ He avoided looking at her. ‘And what’s the upshot?’

‘I shall have nearly fifteen hundred pounds.’

‘So much as that? Well, that’s better than nothing, isn’t it?’

‘Very much better.’

They walked on in silence. Marian stole a glance at her companion.

‘I should have thought it a great deal,’ she said presently, ‘before I had begun to think of thousands.’

‘Fifteen hundred. Well, it means fifty pounds a year, I suppose.’

He chewed the end of his moustache.

‘Let us sit down on this bench. Fifteen hundred—h’m! And nothing more is to be hoped for?’

‘Nothing. I should have thought men would wish to pay their debts, even after they had been bankrupt; but they tell us we can’t expect anything more from these people.’

‘You are thinking of Walter Scott, and that kind of thing’—Jasper laughed. ‘Oh, that’s quite unbusinesslike; it would be setting a pernicious

example nowadays. Well, and what's to be done ?'

Marian had no answer for such a question. The tone of it was a new stab to her heart, which had suffered so many during the past half year.

'Now, I'll ask you frankly,' Jasper went on, 'and I know you will reply in the same spirit: would it be wise for us to marry on this money?'

'On this money?'

She looked into his face with painful earnestness.

'You mean,' he said, 'that it can't be spared for that purpose?'

What she really meant was uncertain even to herself. She had wished to hear how Jasper would receive the news, and thereby to direct her own course. Had he welcomed it as offering a possibility of their marriage, that would have gladdened her, though it would then have been necessary to show him all the difficulties by which she was beset; for some time they had not spoken of her father's position, and Jasper seemed willing to forget all about that complication of their troubles. But marriage did not occur to him, and he was evidently quite prepared to hear that she could no longer regard this money as

her own to be freely disposed of. This was on one side a relief, but on the other it confirmed her fears. She would rather have heard him plead with her to neglect her parents for the sake of being his wife. Love excuses everything, and his selfishness would have been easily lost sight of in the assurance that he still desired her.

‘You say,’ she replied, with bent head, ‘that it would bring us fifty pounds a year. If another fifty were added to that, my father and mother would be supported in case the worst comes. I might earn fifty pounds.’

‘You wish me to understand, Marian, that I mustn’t expect that you will bring me anything when we are married.’

His tone was that of acquiescence; not by any means of displeasure. He spoke as if desirous of saying for her something she found a difficulty in saying for herself.

‘Jasper, it is so hard for me! So hard for me! How could I help remembering what you told me when I promised to be your wife?’

‘I spoke the truth rather brutally,’ he replied, in a kind voice. ‘Let all that be unsaid, forgotten. We are in quite a different position now. Be open with me, Marian; surely you can trust my common sense and good feeling. Put

aside all thought of things I have said, and don't be restrained by any fear lest you should seem to me unwomanly—you can't be that. What is your own wish? What do you really wish to do, now that there is no uncertainty calling for postponements?'

Marian raised her eyes, and was about to speak as she regarded him; but with the first accent her look fell.

'I wish to be your wife.'

He waited, thinking and struggling with himself.

'Yet you feel that it would be heartless to take and use this money for our own purposes?'

'What is to become of my parents, Jasper?'

'But then you admit that the fifteen hundred pounds won't support them. You talk of earning fifty pounds a year for them.'

'Need I cease to write, dear, if we were married? Wouldn't you let me help them?'

'But, my dear girl, you are taking for granted that we shall have enough for ourselves.'

'I didn't mean at once,' she explained hurriedly. 'In a short time—in a year. You are getting on so well. You will soon have a sufficient income, I am sure.'

Jasper rose.

‘Let us walk as far as the next seat. Don’t speak. I have something to think about.’

Moving on beside him, she slipped her hand softly within his arm ; but Jasper did not put the arm into position to support hers, and her hand fell again, dropped suddenly. They reached another bench, and again became seated.

‘It comes to this, Marian,’ he said, with portentous gravity. ‘Support you, I could—I have little doubt of that. Maud is provided for, and Dora can make a living for herself. I could support you and leave you free to give your parents whatever you can earn by your own work. But——’

He paused significantly. It was his wish that Marian should supply the consequence, but she did not speak.

‘Very well,’ he exclaimed. ‘Then when are we to be married?’

The tone of resignation was too marked. Jasper was not good as a comedian; he lacked subtlety.

‘We must wait,’ fell from Marian’s lips, in the whisper of despair.

‘Wait? But how long?’ he inquired, dispassionately.

‘Do you wish to be freed from your engagement, Jasper?’

He was not strong enough to reply with a plain 'Yes,' and so have done with his perplexities. He feared the girl's face, and he feared his own subsequent emotions.

'Don't talk in that way, Marian. The question is simply this : Are we to wait a year, or are we to wait five years? In a year's time, I shall probably be able to have a small house somewhere out in the suburbs. If we are married then, I shall be happy enough with so good a wife, but my career will take a different shape. I shall just throw overboard certain of my ambitions, and work steadily on at earning a livelihood. If we wait five years, I may perhaps have obtained an editorship, and in that case I should of course have all sorts of better things to offer you.'

'But, dear, why shouldn't you get an editorship all the same if you are married?'

'I have explained to you several times that success of that kind is not compatible with a small house in the suburbs and all the ties of a narrow income. As a bachelor, I can go about freely, make acquaintances, dine at people's houses, perhaps entertain a useful friend now and then—and so on. It is not merit that succeeds in my line ; it is merit *plus* opportunity.

Marrying now, I cut myself off from opportunity, that's all.'

She kept silence.

'Decide my fate for me, Marian,' he pursued, magnanimously. 'Let us make up our minds and do what we decide to do. Indeed, it doesn't concern me so much as yourself. Are you content to lead a simple, unambitious life? Or should you prefer your husband to be a man of some distinction?'

'I know so well what your own wish is. But to wait for years—you will cease to love me, and will only think of me as a hindrance in your way.'

'Well now, when I said five years, of course I took a round number. Three—two *might* make all the difference to me.'

'Let it be just as you wish. I can bear anything rather than lose your love.'

'You feel, then, that it will decidedly be wise not to marry whilst we are still so poor?'

'Yes; whatever you are convinced of is right.'

He again rose, and looked at his watch.

'Jasper, you don't think that I have behaved selfishly in wishing to let my father have the money?'

‘I should have been greatly surprised if you hadn’t wished it. I certainly can’t imagine you saying: “Oh, let them do as best they can!” That would have been selfish with a vengeance.’

‘Now you are speaking kindly! Must you go, Jasper?’

‘I must indeed. Two hours’ work I am bound to get before seven o’clock.’

‘And I have been making it harder for you, by disturbing your mind.’

‘No, no; it’s all right now. I shall go at it with all the more energy, now we have come to a decision.’

‘Dora has asked me to go to Kew on Sunday. Shall you be able to come, dear?’

‘By Jove, no! I have three engagements on Sunday afternoon. I’ll try and keep the Sunday after; I will indeed.’

‘What are the engagements?’ she asked timidly.

As they walked back towards Gloucester Gate, he answered her question, showing how unpardonable it would be to neglect the people concerned. Then they parted, Jasper going off at a smart pace homewards.

Marian turned down Park Street, and proceeded for some distance along Camden Road. The house in which she and her parents now

lived was not quite so far away as St. Paul's Crescent; they rented four rooms, one of which had to serve both as Alfred Yule's sitting-room and for the gatherings of the family at meals. Mrs. Yule generally sat in the kitchen, and Marian used her bedroom as a study. About half the collection of books had been sold; those that remained were still a respectable library, almost covering the walls of the room where their disconsolate possessor passed his mournful days.

He could read for a few hours a day, but only large type, and fear of consequences kept him well within the limit of such indulgence laid down by his advisers. Though he inwardly spoke as if his case were hopeless, Yule was very far from having resigned himself to this conviction; indeed, the prospect of spending his latter years in darkness and idleness was too dreadful to him to be accepted so long as a glimmer of hope remained. He saw no reason why the customary operation should not restore him to his old pursuits, and he would have borne it ill if his wife or daughter had ever ceased to oppose the despair which it pleased him to affect.

On the whole, he was noticeably patient. At the time of their removal to these lodgings,

seeing that Marian prepared herself to share the change as a matter of course, he let her do as she would without comment; nor had he since spoken to her on the subject which had proved so dangerous. Confidence between them there was none; Yule addressed his daughter in a grave, cold, civil tone, and Marian replied gently, but without tenderness. For Mrs. Yule the disaster to the family was distinctly a gain; she could not but mourn her husband's affliction, yet he no longer visited her with the fury or contemptuous impatience of former days. Doubtless the fact of needing so much tendance had its softening influence on the man; he could not turn brutally upon his wife when every hour of the day afforded him some proof of her absolute devotion. Of course his open-air exercise was still unhindered, and in this season of the returning sun he walked a great deal, decidedly to the advantage of his general health—which again must have been a source of benefit to his temper. Of evenings, Marian sometimes read to him. He never requested this, but he did not reject the kindness.

This afternoon Marian found her father examining a volume of prints which had been lent him by Mr. Quarmby. The table was laid

for dinner (owing to Marian's frequent absence at the Museum, no change had been made in the order of meals) and Yule sat by the window, his book propped on a second chair. A whiteness in his eyes showed how the disease was progressing, but his face had a more wholesome colour than a year ago.

'Mr. Hinks and Mr. Gorbutt inquired very kindly after you to-day,' said the girl, as she seated herself.

'Oh, is Hinks out again?'

'Yes, but he looks very ill.'

They conversed of such matters until Mrs. Yule—now her own servant—brought in the dinner. After the meal, Marian was in her bedroom for about an hour; then she went to her father, who sat in idleness, smoking.

'What is your mother doing?' he asked, as she entered.

'Some needlework.'

'I had perhaps better say'—he spoke rather stiffly, and with averted face—'that I make no exclusive claim to the use of this room. As I can no longer pretend to study, it would be idle to keep up the show of privacy that mustn't be disturbed. Perhaps you will mention to your mother that she is quite at liberty to sit here whenever she chooses.'

It was characteristic of him that he should wish to deliver this permission by proxy. But Marian understood how much was implied in such an announcement.

‘I will tell mother,’ she said. ‘But at this moment I wished to speak to you privately. How would you advise me to invest my money?’

Yule looked surprised, and answered with cold dignity.

‘It is strange that you should put such a question to me. I should have supposed your interests were in the hands of—of some competent person.’

‘This will be my private affair, father. I wish to get as high a rate of interest as I safely can.’

‘I really must decline to advise, or interfere in any way. But, as you have introduced this subject, I may as well put a question which is connected with it. Could you give me any idea as to how long you are likely to remain with us?’

‘At least a year,’ was the answer, ‘and very likely much longer.’

‘Am I to understand, then, that your marriage is indefinitely postponed?’

‘Yes, father.’

‘And will you tell me why?’

‘I can only say that it has seemed better—to both of us.’

Yule detected the sorrowful emotion she was endeavouring to suppress. His conception of Milvain’s character made it easy for him to form a just surmise as to the reasons for this postponement; he was gratified to think that Marian might learn how rightly he had judged her wooer, and an involuntary pity for the girl did not prevent his hoping that the detestable alliance was doomed. With difficulty he refrained from smiling.

‘I will make no comment on that,’ he remarked, with a certain emphasis. ‘But do you imply that this investment of which you speak is to be solely for your own advantage?’

‘For mine, and for yours and mother’s.’

There was a silence of a minute or two. As yet it had not been necessary to take any steps for raising money, but a few months more would see the family without resources, save those provided by Marian, who, without discussion, had been simply setting aside what she received for her work.

‘You must be well aware,’ said Yule at length, ‘that I cannot consent to benefit by any

such offer. When it is necessary, I shall borrow on the security of——’

‘Why should you do that, father?’ Marian interrupted. ‘My money is yours. If you refuse it as a gift, then why may not I lend to you as well as a stranger? Repay me when your eyes are restored. For the present, all our anxieties are at an end. We can live very well until you are able to write again.’

For his sake she put it in his way. Supposing him never able to earn anything, then indeed would come a time of hardship; but she could not contemplate that. The worst would only befall them in case she was forsaken by Jasper, and if that happened all else would be of little account.

‘This has come upon me as a surprise,’ said Yule, in his most reserved tone. ‘I can give no definite reply; I must think of it.’

‘Should you like me to ask mother to bring her sewing here now?’ asked Marian, rising.

‘Yes, you may do so.’

In this way the awkwardness of the situation was overcome, and when Marian next had occasion to speak of money matters no serious objection was offered to her proposal.

Dora Milvain of course learnt what had come to pass; to anticipate criticism, her

brother imparted to her the decision at which Marian and he had arrived. She reflected with an air of discontent.

‘So you are quite satisfied,’ was her question at length, ‘that Marian should toil to support her parents as well as herself?’

‘Can I help it?’

‘I shall think very ill of you if you don’t marry her in a year at latest.’

‘I tell you, Marian has made a deliberate choice. She understands me perfectly, and is quite satisfied with my projects. You will have the kindness, Dora, not to disturb her faith in me.’

‘I agree to that; and in return I shall let you know when she begins to suffer from hunger. It won’t be very long till then, you may be sure. How do you suppose three people are going to live on a hundred a year? And it’s very doubtful indeed whether Marian can earn as much as fifty pounds. Never mind; I shall let you know when she is beginning to starve, and doubtless that will amuse you.’

At the end of July Maud was married. Between Mr. Dolomore and Jasper existed no superfluous kindness, each resenting the other’s self-sufficiency; but Jasper, when once satisfied

of his proposed brother-in-law's straightforwardness, was careful not to give offence to a man who might some day serve him. Provided this marriage resulted in moderate happiness to Maud, it was undoubtedly a magnificent stroke of luck. Mrs. Lane, the lady who has so often been casually mentioned, took upon herself those offices in connection with the ceremony which the bride's mother is wont to perform; at her house was held the wedding-breakfast, and such other absurdities of usage as recommend themselves to Society. Dora of course played the part of a bridesmaid, and Jasper went through his duties with the suave seriousness of a man who has convinced himself that he cannot afford to despise anything that the world sanctions.

About the same time occurred another event which was to have more importance for this aspiring little family than could as yet be foreseen. Whelpdale's noteworthy idea triumphed; the weekly paper called *Chat* was thoroughly transformed, and appeared as *Chit-Chat*. From the first number, the success of the enterprise was beyond doubt; in a month's time all England was ringing with the fame of this noble new development of journalism; the proprietor saw his way to a solid fortune, and other men

who had money to embark began to scheme imitative publications. It was clear that the quarter-educated would soon be abundantly provided with literature to their taste.

Whelpdale's exultation was unbounded, but in the fifth week of the life of *Chit-Chat* something happened which threatened to overturn his sober reason. Jasper was walking along the Strand one afternoon, when he saw his ingenious friend approaching him in a manner scarcely to be accounted for, unless Whelpdale's abstemiousness had for once given way before convivial invitation. The young man's hat was on the back of his head, and his coat flew wildly as he rushed forwards with perspiring face and glaring eyes. He would have passed without observing Jasper, had not the latter called to him; then he turned round, laughed insanely, grasped his acquaintance by the wrists, and drew him aside into a court.

'What do you think?' he panted. 'What do you think has happened?'

'Not what one would suppose, I hope. You seem to have gone mad.'

'I've got Lake's place on *Chit-Chat*!' cried the other hoarsely. 'Two hundred and fifty a year! Lake and the editor quarrelled—pum-

melled each other—neither know nor care what it was about. My fortune's made !'

'You're a modest man,' remarked Jasper, smiling.

'Certainly I am. I have always admitted it. But remember that there's my connection with Fleet as well ; no need to give that up. Presently I shall be making a clear six hundred, my dear sir ! A clear six hundred, if a penny !'

'Satisfactory, so far.'

'But you must remember that I'm not a big gun, like you ! Why, my dear Milvain, a year ago I should have thought an income of two hundred a glorious competence. I don't aim at such things as are fit for you. You won't be content till you have thousands ; of course I know that. But I'm a humble fellow. Yet no ; by Jingo, I'm not ! In one way I'm not—I must confess it.'

'In what instance are you arrogant?'

'I can't tell you—not yet ; this is neither time nor place. I say, when will you dine with me ? I shall give a dinner to half a dozen of my acquaintances somewhere or other. Poor old Biffen must come. When can you dine?'

'Give me a week's notice, and I'll fit it in.'

That dinner came duly off. On the day that

followed, Jasper and Dora left town for their holiday; they went to the Channel Islands, and spent more than half of the three weeks they had allowed themselves in Sark. Passing over from Guernsey to that island, they were amused to see a copy of *Chit-Chat* in the hands of an obese and well-dressed man.

‘Is *he* one of the quarter-educated?’ asked Dora, laughing.

‘Not in Whelpdale’s sense of the word. But, strictly speaking, no doubt he is. The quarter-educated constitute a very large class indeed; how large, the huge success of that paper is demonstrating. I’ll write to Whelpdale, and let him know that his benefaction has extended even to Sark.’

This letter was written, and in a few days there came a reply.

‘Why, the fellow has written to you as well!’ exclaimed Jasper, taking up a second letter; both were on the table of their sitting-room when they came to their lodgings for lunch. ‘That’s his hand.’

‘It looks like it.’

Dora hummed an air as she regarded the envelope, then she took it away with her to her room upstairs.

‘What had he to say?’ Jasper inquired, when she came down again and seated herself at the table.

‘Oh, a friendly letter. What does he say to you?’

Dora had never looked so animated and fresh of colour since leaving London; her brother remarked this, and was glad to think that the air of the Channel should be doing her so much good. He read Whelpdale’s letter aloud; it was facetious, but oddly respectful.

‘The reverence that fellow has for me is astonishing,’ he observed with a laugh. ‘The queer thing is, it increases the better he knows me.’

Dora laughed for five minutes.

‘Oh, what a splendid epigram!’ she exclaimed. ‘It is indeed a queer thing, Jasper! Did you mean that to be a good joke, or was it better still by coming out unintentionally?’

‘You are in remarkable spirits, old girl. By-the-by, would you mind letting me see that letter of yours?’

He held out his hand.

‘I left it upstairs,’ Dora replied carelessly.

‘Rather presumptuous in him, it seems to me.’

‘Oh, he writes quite as respectfully to me as he does to you,’ she returned, with a peculiar smile.

‘But what business has he to write at all? It’s confounded impertinence, now I come to think of it. I shall give him a hint to remember his position.’

Dora could not be quite sure whether he spoke seriously or not. As both of them had begun to eat with an excellent appetite, a few moments were allowed to pass before the girl again spoke.

‘His position is as good as ours,’ she said at length.

‘As good as ours? The “sub.” of a paltry rag like *Chit-Chat*, and assistant to a literary agency!’

‘He makes considerably more money than we do.’

‘Money! What’s money?’

Dora was again mirthful.

‘Oh, of course money is nothing! *We* write for honour and glory. Don’t forget to insist on that when you reprove Mr. Whelpdale; no doubt it will impress him.’

Late in the evening of that day, when the brother and sister had strolled by moonlight up

to the windmill which occupies the highest point of Sark, and as they stood looking upon the pale expanse of sea, dotted with the gleam of lighthouses near and far, Dora broke the silence to say quietly :

‘I may as well tell you that Mr. Whelpdale wants to know if I will marry him.’

‘The deuce he does!’ cried Jasper, with a start. ‘If I didn’t half suspect something of that kind! What astounding impudence!’

‘You seriously think so?’

‘Well, don’t you? You hardly know him, to begin with. And then—oh, confound it!’

‘Very well, I’ll tell him that his impudence astonishes me.’

‘You will?’

‘Certainly. Of course in civil terms. But don’t let this make any difference between you and him. Just pretend to know nothing about it; no harm is done.’

‘You are speaking in earnest?’

‘Quite. He has written in a very proper way, and there’s no reason whatever to disturb our friendliness with him. I have a right to give directions in a matter like this, and you’ll please to obey them.’

Before going to bed Dora wrote a letter to

Mr. Whelpdale, not, indeed, accepting his offer forthwith, but conveying to him with much gracefulness an unmistakable encouragement to persevere. This was posted on the morrow, and its writer continued to benefit most remarkably by the sun and breezes and rock-scrambling of Sark.

Soon after their return to London, Dora had the satisfaction of paying the first visit to her sister at the Dolomores' house in Ovington Square. Maud was established in the midst of luxuries, and talked with laughing scorn of the days when she inhabited Grub Street; her literary tastes were henceforth to serve as merely a note of distinction, an added grace which made evident her superiority to the well attired and smooth-tongued people among whom she was content to shine. On the one hand, she had contact with the world of fashionable literature, on the other with that of fashionable ignorance. Mrs. Lane's house was a meeting-point of the two spheres.

'I shan't be there very often,' remarked Jasper, as Dora and he discussed their sister's magnificence. 'That's all very well in its way, but I aim at something higher.'

'So do I,' Dora replied.

‘I’m very glad to hear that. I confess it seemed to me that you were rather too cordial with Whelpdale yesterday.’

‘One must behave civilly. Mr. Whelpdale quite understands me.’

‘You are sure of that? He didn’t seem quite so gloomy as he ought to have been.’

‘The success of *Chit-Chat* keeps him in good spirits.’

It was perhaps a week after this that Mrs. Dolomore came quite unexpectedly to the house by Regent’s Park, as early as eleven o’clock in the morning. She had a long talk in private with Dora. Jasper was not at home; when he returned towards evening, Dora came to his room with a countenance which disconcerted him.

‘Is it true,’ she asked abruptly, standing before him with her hands strained together, ‘that you have been representing yourself as no longer engaged to Marian?’

‘Who has told you so?’

‘That doesn’t matter. I have heard it, and I want to know from you that it is false.’

Jasper thrust his hands into his pockets and walked apart.

‘I can take no notice,’ he said with indifference, ‘of anonymous gossip.’

‘Well, then, I will tell you how I have heard. Maud came this morning, and told me that Mrs. Betterton had been asking her about it. Mrs. Betterton had heard from Mrs. Lane.’

‘From Mrs. Lane? And from whom did *she* hear, pray?’

‘That I don’t know. Is it true or not?’

‘I have never told anyone that my engagement was at an end,’ replied Jasper, deliberately.

The girl met his eyes.

‘Then I was right,’ she said. ‘Of course I told Maud that it was impossible to believe this for a moment. But how has it come to be said?’

‘You might as well ask me how any lie gets into circulation among people of that sort. I have told you the truth, and there’s an end of it.’

Dora lingered for a while, but left the room without saying anything more.

She sat up late, mostly engaged in thinking, though at times an open book was in her hand. It was nearly half-past twelve when a very light rap at the door caused her to start. She called, and Jasper came in.

‘Why are you still up?’ he asked, avoiding

her look as he moved forward and took a leaning attitude behind an easy-chair.

‘Oh, I don’t know. Do you want anything?’

There was a pause; then Jasper said in an unsteady voice:

‘I am not given to lying, Dora, and I feel confoundedly uncomfortable about what I said to you early this evening. I didn’t lie in the ordinary sense; it’s true enough that I have never told anyone that my engagement was at an end. But I have acted as if it were, and it’s better I should tell you.’

His sister gazed at him with indignation.

‘You have acted as if you were free?’

‘Yes. I have proposed to Miss Rupert. How Mrs. Lane and that lot have come to know anything about this I don’t understand. I am not aware of any connecting link between them and the Ruperts, or the Barlows either. Perhaps there are none; most likely the rumour has no foundation in their knowledge. Still, it is better that I should have told you. Miss Rupert has never heard that I was engaged, nor have her friends the Barlows—at least I don’t see how they could have done. She may have told Mrs. Barlow of my proposal—probably would; and this *may* somehow have got round to those

other people. But Maud didn't make any mention of Miss Rupert, did she?'

Dora replied with a cold negative.

'Well, there's the state of things. It isn't pleasant, but that's what I have done.'

'Do you mean that Miss Rupert has accepted you?'

'No. I wrote to her. She answered that she was going to Germany for a few weeks, and that I should have her reply whilst she was away. I am waiting.'

'But what name is to be given to behaviour such as this?'

'Listen : didn't you know perfectly well that this must be the end of it?'

'Do you suppose I thought you utterly shameless and cruel beyond words?'

'I suppose I am both. It was a moment of desperate temptation, though. I had dined at the Ruperts'—you remember—and it seemed to me there was no mistaking the girl's manner.'

'Don't call her a girl !' broke in Dora, scornfully. 'You say she is several years older than yourself.'

'Well, at all events, she's intellectual, and very rich. I yielded to the temptation.'

'And deserted Marian just when she has

most need of help and consolation? It's frightful !'

Jasper moved to another chair and sat down. He was much perturbed.

'Look here, Dora, I regret it ; I do, indeed. And, what's more, if that woman refuses me—as it's more than likely she will—I will go to Marian and ask her to marry me at once. I promise that.'

His sister made a movement of contemptuous impatience.

'And if the woman *doesn't* refuse you ?'

'Then I can't help it. But there's one thing more I will say. Whether I marry Marian or Miss Rupert, I sacrifice my strongest feelings—in the one case to a sense of duty, in the other to worldly advantage. I was an idiot to write that letter, for I knew at the time that there was a woman who is far more to me than Miss Rupert and all her money—a woman I might, perhaps, marry. Don't ask any questions ; I shall not answer them. As I have said so much, I wished you to understand my position fully. You know the promise I have made. Don't say anything to Marian ; if I am left free I shall marry her as soon as possible.'

And so he left the room.

For a fortnight and more he remained in uncertainty. His life was very uncomfortable, for Dora would only speak to him when necessity compelled her; and there were two meetings with Marian, at which he had to act his part as well as he could. At length came the expected letter. Very nicely expressed, very friendly, very complimentary, but—a refusal.

He handed it to Dora across the breakfast-table, saying with a pinched smile :

‘Now you can look cheerful again. I am doomed.’

CHAPTER XXXV

FEVER AND REST

MILVAIN'S skilful efforts notwithstanding, 'Mr. Bailey, Grocer,' had no success. By two publishers the book had been declined; the firm which brought it out offered the author half profits and fifteen pounds on account, greatly to Harold Biffen's satisfaction. But reviewers in general were either angry or coldly contemptuous. 'Let Mr. Biffen bear in mind,' said one of these sages, 'that a novelist's first duty is to tell a story.' 'Mr. Biffen,' wrote another, 'seems not to understand that a work of art must before everything else afford amusement.' 'A pretentious book of the *genre ennuyant*,' was the brief comment of a Society journal. A weekly of high standing began its short notice in a rage: 'Here is another of those intolerable productions for which we are indebted to the spirit of grovelling realism. This author, let it be said, is never offensive, but then one must go on to describe

his work by a succession of negatives; it is never interesting, never profitable, never——' and the rest. The eulogy in *The West End* had a few timid echoes. That in *The Current* would have secured more imitators, but unfortunately it appeared when most of the reviewing had already been done. And, as Jasper truly said, only a concurrence of powerful testimonials could have compelled any number of people to affect an interest in this book. 'The first duty of a novelist is to tell a story:' the perpetual repetition of this phrase is a warning to all men who propose drawing from the life. Biffen only offered a slice of biography, and it was found to lack flavour.

He wrote to Mrs. Reardon: 'I cannot thank you enough for this very kind letter about my book; I value it more than I should the praises of all the reviewers in existence. You have understood my aim. Few people will do that, and very few indeed could express it with such clear conciseness.'

If Amy had but contented herself with a civil acknowledgment of the volumes he sent her! She thought it a kindness to write to him so appreciatively, to exaggerate her approval. The poor fellow was so lonely. Yes, but his loneliness

only became intolerable when a beautiful woman had smiled upon him, and so forced him to dream perpetually of that supreme joy of life which to him was forbidden.

It was a fatal day, that on which Amy put herself under his guidance to visit Reardon's poor room at Islington. In the old times, Harold had been wont to regard his friend's wife as the perfect woman ; seldom in his life had he enjoyed female society, and when he first met Amy it was years since he had spoken with any woman above the rank of a lodging-house keeper or a needle-plier. Her beauty seemed to him of a very high order, and her mental endowments filled him with an exquisite delight, not to be appreciated by men who have never been in his position. When the rupture came between Amy and her husband, Harold could not believe that she was in any way to blame ; held to Reardon by strong friendship, he yet accused him of injustice to Amy. And what he saw of her at Brighton confirmed him in this judgment. When he accompanied her to Manville Street, he allowed her, of course, to remain alone in the room where Reardon had lived ; but Amy presently summoned him, and asked him questions. Every tear she shed watered a growth of passionate tender-

ness in the solitary man's heart. Parting from her at length, he went to hide his face in darkness and think of her—think of her.

A fatal day. There was an end of all his peace, all his capacity for labour, his patient endurance of penury. Once, when he was about three-and-twenty, he had been in love with a girl of gentle nature and fair intelligence; on account of his poverty, he could not even hope that his love might be returned, and he went away to bear the misery as best he might. Since then the life he had led precluded the forming of such attachments; it would never have been possible for him to support a wife of however humble origin. At intervals he felt the full weight of his loneliness, but there were happily long periods during which his Greek studies and his efforts in realistic fiction made him indifferent to the curse laid upon him. But after that hour of intimate speech with Amy, he never again knew rest of mind or heart.

Accepting what Reardon had bequeathed to him, he removed the books and furniture to a room in that part of the town which he had found most convenient for his singular tutorial pursuits. The winter did not pass without days of all but starvation, but in March he received

his fifteen pounds for 'Mr. Bailey,' and this was a fortune, putting him beyond the reach of hunger for full six months. Not long after that he yielded to a temptation that haunted him day and night, and went to call upon Amy, who was still living with her mother at Westbourne Park. When he entered the drawing-room Amy was sitting there alone; she rose with an exclamation of frank pleasure.

'I have often thought of you lately, Mr. Biffen. How kind to come and see me!'

He could scarcely speak; her beauty, as she stood before him in the graceful black dress, was anguish to his excited nerves, and her voice was so cruel in its conventional warmth. When he looked at her eyes, he remembered how their brightness had been dimmed with tears, and the sorrow he had shared with her seemed to make him more than an ordinary friend. When he told her of his success with the publishers, she was delighted.

'Oh, when is it to come out? I shall watch the advertisements so anxiously.'

'Will you allow me to send you a copy, Mrs. Reardon?'

'Can you really spare one?'

Of the half-dozen he would receive, he

scarcely knew how to dispose of three. And Amy expressed her gratitude in the most charming way. She had gained much in point of manner during the past twelve months ; her ten thousand pounds inspired her with the confidence necessary to a perfect demeanour. That slight hardness which was wont to be perceptible in her tone had altogether passed away ; she seemed to be cultivating flexibility of voice.

Mrs. Yule came in, and was all graciousness. Then two callers presented themselves. Biffen's pleasure was at an end as soon as he had to adapt himself to polite dialogue ; he escaped as speedily as possible.

He was not the kind of man that deceives himself as to his own aspect in the eyes of others. Be as kind as she might, Amy could not set him strutting Malvolio-wise ; she viewed him as a poor devil who often had to pawn his coat—a man of parts who would never get on in the world—a friend to be thought of kindly because her dead husband had valued him. Nothing more than that ; he understood perfectly the limits of her feeling. But this could not put restraint upon the emotion with which he received any most trifling utterance of kindness from her. He did not think of what was, but of

what, under changed circumstances, might be. To encourage such fantasy was the idlest self-torment, but he had gone too far in this form of indulgence. He became the slave of his inflamed imagination.

In that letter with which he replied to her praises of his book, perchance he had allowed himself to speak too much as he thought. He wrote in reckless delight, and did not wait for the prudence of a later hour. When it was past recall, he would gladly have softened many of the expressions the letter contained. 'I value it more than the praises of all the reviewers in existence'—would Amy be offended at that? 'Yours in gratitude and reverence,' he had signed himself—the kind of phrase that comes naturally to a passionate man, when he would fain say more than he dares. To what purpose this half-revelation? Unless, indeed, he wished to learn once and for ever, by the gentlest of repulses, that his homage was only welcome so long as it kept well within conventional terms.

He passed a month of distracted idleness, until there came a day when the need to see Amy was so imperative that it mastered every consideration. He donned his best clothes, and about four o'clock presented himself at Mrs.

Yule's house. By ill luck there happened to be at least half a dozen callers in the drawing-room ; the strappado would have been preferable, in his eyes, to such an ordeal as this. Moreover, he was convinced that both Amy and her mother received him with far less cordiality than on the last occasion. He had expected it, but he bit his lips till the blood came. What business had he among people of this kind? No doubt the visitors wondered at his comparative shabbiness, and asked themselves how he ventured to make a call without the regulation chimney-pot hat. It was a wretched and foolish mistake.

Ten minutes saw him in the street again, vowing that he would never approach Amy more. Not that he found fault with her ; the blame was entirely his own.

He lived on the third floor of a house in Goodge Street, above a baker's shop. The bequest of Reardon's furniture was a great advantage to him, as he had only to pay rent for a bare room ; the books, too, came as a godsend, since the destruction of his own. He had now only one pupil, and was not exerting himself to find others ; his old energy had forsaken him.

For the failure of his book he cared nothing. It was no more than he anticipated. The work

was done—the best he was capable of—and this satisfied him.

It was doubtful whether he loved Amy, in the true sense of exclusive desire. She represented for him all that is lovely in womanhood ; to his starved soul and senses she was woman, the complement of his frustrate being. Circumstance had made her the means of exciting in him that natural force which had hitherto either been dormant or had yielded to the resolute will.

Companionless, inert, he suffered the tortures which are so ludicrous and contemptible to the happily married. Life was barren to him, and would soon grow hateful ; only in sleep could he cast off the unchanging thoughts and desires which made all else meaningless. And rightly meaningless ; he revolted against the unnatural constraints forbidding him to complete his manhood. By what fatality was he alone of men withheld from the winning of a woman's love ?

He could not bear to walk the streets where the faces of beautiful women would encounter him. When he must needs leave the house, he went about in the poor, narrow ways, where only spectacles of coarseness, and want, and toil would be presented to him. Yet even here he

was too often reminded that the poverty-stricken of the class to which poverty is natural were not condemned to endure in solitude. Only he who belonged to no class, who was rejected alike by his fellows in privation and by his equals in intellect, must die without having known the touch of a loving woman's hand.

The summer went by, and he was unconscious of its warmth and light. How his days passed he could not have said.

One evening in early autumn, as he stood before the book-stall at the end of Goodge Street, a familiar voice accosted him. It was Whelpdale's. A month or two ago he had stubbornly refused an invitation to dine with Whelpdale and other acquaintances—you remember what the occasion was—and since then the prosperous young man had not crossed his path.

'I've something to tell you,' said the assailer, taking hold of his arm. 'I'm in a tremendous state of mind, and want someone to share my delight. You can walk a short way, I hope? Not too busy with some new book?'

Biffen gave no answer, but went whither he was led.

'You *are* writing a new book, I suppose?'

Don't be discouraged, old fellow. "Mr. Bailey" will have his day yet ; I know men who consider it an undoubted work of genius. What's the next to deal with ?'

'I haven't decided yet,' replied Harold, merely to avoid argument. He spoke so seldom that the sound of his own voice was strange to him.

'Thinking over it, I suppose, in your usual solid way. Don't be hurried. But I must tell you of this affair of mine. You know Dora Milvain ; I have asked her to marry me, and, by the Powers ! she has given me an encouraging answer ! Not an actual yes, but encouraging ! She's away in the Channel Islands, and I wrote——'

He talked on for a quarter of an hour. Then, with a sudden movement, the listener freed himself.

'I can't go any farther,' he said hoarsely. 'Good-bye !'

Whelpdale was disconcerted.

'I have been boring you. That's a confounded fault of mine ; I know it.'

Biffen had waved his hand, and was gone.

A week or two more would see him at the end of his money. He had no lessons now, and

could not write ; from his novel nothing was to be expected. He might apply again to his brother, but such dependence was unjust and unworthy. And why should he struggle to preserve a life which had no prospect but of misery ?

It was in the hours following his encounter with Whelpdale that he first knew the actual desire of death, the simple longing for extinction. One must go far in suffering before the innate will-to-live is thus truly overcome ; weariness of bodily anguish may induce this perversion of the instincts ; less often, that despair of suppressed emotion which had fallen upon Harold. Through the night he kept his thoughts fixed on death in its aspect of repose, of eternal oblivion. And herein he had found solace.

The next night it was the same. Moving about among common needs and occupations, he knew not a moment's cessation of heart-ache, but when he lay down in the darkness a hopeful summons whispered to him. Night, which had been the worst season of his pain, had now grown friendly ; it came as an anticipation of the sleep that is everlasting.

A few more days, and he was possessed by a calm of spirit such as he had never known. His

resolve was taken, not in a moment of supreme conflict, but as the result of a subtle process by which his imagination had become in love with death. Turning from contemplation of life's one rapture, he looked with the same intensity of desire to a state that had neither fear nor hope.

One afternoon he went to the Museum Reading-room, and was busy for a few minutes in consultation of a volume which he took from the shelves of medical literature. On his way homeward he entered two or three chemists' shops. Something of which he had need could be procured only in very small quantities; but repetition of his demand in different places supplied him sufficiently. When he reached his room, he emptied the contents of sundry little bottles into one larger, and put this in his pocket. Then he wrote rather a long letter, addressed to his brother at Liverpool.

It had been a beautiful day, and there wanted still a couple of hours before the warm, golden sunlight would disappear. Harold stood and looked round his room. As always, it presented a neat, orderly aspect, but his eye caught sight of a volume which stood upside down, and this fault—particularly hateful to a bookish man—

he rectified. He put his blotting-pad square on the table, closed the lid of the inkstand, arranged his pens. Then he took his hat and stick, locked the door behind him, and went downstairs. At the foot he spoke to his landlady, and told her that he should not return that night. As soon as possible after leaving the house he posted his letter.

His direction was westward ; walking at a steady, purposeful pace, with cheery countenance and eyes that gave sign of pleasure as often as they turned to the sun-smitten clouds, he struck across Kensington Gardens, and then on towards Fulham, where he crossed the Thames to Putney. The sun was just setting ; he paused a few moments on the bridge, watching the river with a quiet smile, and enjoying the splendour of the sky. Up Putney Hill he walked slowly ; when he reached the top it was growing dark, but an unwonted effect in the atmosphere caused him to turn and look to the east. An exclamation escaped his lips, for there before him was the new-risen moon, a perfect globe, vast and red. He gazed at it for a long time.

When the daylight had entirely passed, he went forward on to the heath, and rambled, as if idly, to a secluded part, where trees and

bushes made a deep shadow under the full moon. It was still quite warm, and scarcely a breath of air moved among the reddening leaves.

Sure at length that he was remote from all observation, he pressed into a little copse, and there reclined on the grass, leaning against the stem of a tree. The moon was now hidden from him, but by looking upward he could see its light upon a long, faint cloud, and the blue of the placid sky. His mood was one of ineffable peace. Only thoughts of beautiful things came into his mind; he had reverted to an earlier period of life, when as yet no mission of literary realism had been imposed upon him, and when his passions were still soothed by natural hope. The memory of his friend Reardon was strongly present with him, but of Amy he thought only as of that star which had just come into his vision above the edge of dark foliage—beautiful, but infinitely remote.

Recalling Reardon's voice, it brought to him those last words whispered by his dying companion. He remembered them now :

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

CHAPTER XXXVI

JASPER'S DELICATE CASE

ONLY when he received Miss Rupert's amiably-worded refusal to become his wife was Jasper aware how firmly he had counted on her accepting him. He told Dora with sincerity that his proposal was a piece of foolishness; so far from having any regard for Miss Rupert, he felt towards her with something of antipathy, and at the same time he was conscious of ardent emotions, if not love, for another woman who would be no bad match even from the commercial point of view. Yet so strong was the effect upon him of contemplating a large fortune, that, in despite of reason and desire, he lived in eager expectation of the word which should make him rich. And for several hours after his disappointment he could not overcome the impression of calamity.

A part of that impression was due to the engagement which he must now fulfil. He had

pledged his word to ask Marian to marry him without further delay. To shuffle out of this duty would make him too ignoble even in his own eyes. Its discharge meant, as he had expressed it, that he was 'doomed'; he would deliberately be committing the very error always so flagrant to him in the case of other men who had crippled themselves by early marriage with a penniless woman. But events had enmeshed him; circumstances had proved fatal. Because, in his salad days, he dallied with a girl who had indeed many charms, step by step he had come to the necessity of sacrificing his prospects to that raw attachment. And, to make it more irritating, this happened just when the way began to be much clearer before him.

Unable to think of work, he left the house and wandered gloomily about Regent's Park. For the first time in his recollection the confidence which was wont to inspire him gave way to an attack of sullen discontent. He felt himself ill-used by destiny, and therefore by Marian, who was fate's instrument. It was not in his nature that this mood should last long, but it revealed to him those darker possibilities which his egoism would develop if it came seriously into conflict with overmastering misfortune. A

hope, a craven hope, insinuated itself into the cracks of his infirm resolve. He would not examine it, but conscious of its existence he was able to go home in somewhat better spirits.

He wrote to Marian. If possible she was to meet him at half-past nine next morning at Gloucester Gate. He had reasons for wishing this interview to take place on neutral ground.

Early in the afternoon, when he was trying to do some work, there arrived a letter which he opened with impatient hand ; the writing was Mrs. Reardon's, and he could not guess what she had to communicate.

‘DEAR MR. MILVAIN,—I am distressed beyond measure to read in this morning's newspaper that poor Mr. Biffen has put an end to his life. Doubtless you can obtain more details than are given in this bare report of the discovery of his body. Will you let me hear, or come and see me?’

He read and was astonished. Absorbed in his own affairs, he had not opened the newspaper to-day ; it lay folded on a chair. Hastily he ran his eye over the columns, and found at length a short paragraph which stated that the body of a man who had evidently committed suicide by taking poison had been found on

Putney Heath ; that papers in his pockets identified him as one Harold Biffen, lately resident in Goodge Street, Tottenham Court Road ; and that an inquest would be held, &c. He went to Dora's room, and told her of the event, but without mentioning the letter which had brought it under his notice.

‘I suppose there was no alternative between that and starvation. I scarcely thought of Biffen as likely to kill himself. If Reardon had done it, I shouldn't have felt the least surprise.’

‘Mr. Whelpdale will be bringing us information, no doubt,’ said Dora, who, as she spoke, thought more of that gentleman's visit than of the event that was to occasion it.

‘Really, one can't grieve. There seemed no possibility of his ever earning enough to live decently upon. But why the deuce did he go all the way out there ? Consideration for the people in whose house he lived, I dare say ; Biffen had a good deal of native delicacy.’

Dora felt a secret wish that someone else possessed more of that desirable quality.

Leaving her, Jasper made a rapid, though careful, toilet, and was presently on his way to Westbourne Park. It was his hope that he should reach Mrs. Yule's house before any ordi-

nary afternoon caller could arrive ; and so he did. He had not been here since that evening when he encountered Reardon on the road and heard his reproaches. To his great satisfaction, Amy was alone in the drawing-room ; he held her hand a trifle longer than was necessary, and returned more earnestly the look of interest with which she regarded him.

‘I was ignorant of this affair when your letter came,’ he began, ‘and I set out immediately to see you.’

‘I hoped you would bring me some news. What can have driven the poor man to such extremity?’

‘Poverty, I can only suppose. But I will see Whelpdale. I hadn’t come across Biffen for a long time.’

‘Was he still so very poor?’ asked Amy, compassionately.

‘I’m afraid so. His book failed utterly.’

‘Oh, if I had imagined him still in such distress, surely I might have done something to help him!’—So often the regretful remark of one’s friends, when one has been permitted to perish.

With Amy’s sorrow was mingled a suggestion of tenderness which came of her knowledge that

the dead man had worshipped her. Perchance his death was in part attributable to that hopeless love.

‘He sent me a copy of his novel,’ she said, ‘and I saw him once or twice after that. But he was much better dressed than in former days, and I thought——’

Having this subject to converse upon put the two more quickly at ease than could otherwise have been the case. Jasper was closely observant of the young widow; her finished graces made a strong appeal to his admiration, and even in some degree awed him. He saw that her beauty had matured, and it was more distinctly than ever of the type to which he paid reverence. Amy might take a foremost place among brilliant women. At a dinner-table, in grand toilet, she would be superb; at polite receptions people would whisper: ‘Who is that?’

Biffen fell out of the dialogue.

‘It grieved me very much,’ said Amy, ‘to hear of the misfortune that befell my cousin.’

‘The legacy affair? Why, yes, it was a pity. Especially now that her father is threatened with blindness.’

‘Is it so serious? I heard indirectly that he

had something the matter with his eyes, but I didn't know——'

'They may be able to operate before long, and perhaps it will be successful. But in the meantime Marian has to do his work.'

'This explains the—the delay?' fell from Amy's lips, as she smiled.

Jasper moved uncomfortably. It was a voluntary gesture.

'The whole situation explains it,' he replied, with some show of impulsiveness. 'I am very much afraid Marian is tied during her father's life.'

'Indeed? But there is her mother.'

'No companion for her father, as I think you know. Even if Mr. Yule recovers his sight, it is not at all likely that he will be able to work as before. Our difficulties are so grave that——'

He paused, and let his hand fall despondently.

'I hope it isn't affecting your work—your progress?'

'To some extent, necessarily. I have a good deal of will, you remember, and what I have set my mind upon, no doubt, I shall some day achieve. But—one makes mistakes.'

There was silence.

‘The last three years,’ he continued, ‘have made no slight difference in my position. Recall where I stood when you first knew me. I have done something since then, I think, and by my own steady effort.’

‘Indeed, you have.’

‘Just now I am in need of a little encouragement. You don’t notice any falling off in my work recently?’

‘No, indeed.’

‘Do you see my things in *The Current* and so on, generally?’

‘I don’t think I miss many of your articles. Sometimes I believe I have detected you when there was no signature.’

‘And Dora has been doing well. Her story in that girls’ paper has attracted attention. It’s a great deal to have my mind at rest about both the girls. But I can’t pretend to be in very good spirits.’ He rose. ‘Well, I must try to find out something more about poor Biffen.’

‘Oh, you are not going yet, Mr. Milvain?’

‘Not, assuredly, because I wish to. But I have work to do.’ He stepped aside, but came back as if on an impulse. ‘May I ask you for your advice in a very delicate matter?’

Amy was a little disturbed, but she collected

herself and smiled in a way that reminded Jasper of his walk with her along Gower Street.

‘Let me hear what it is.’

He sat down again, and bent forward.

‘If Marian insists that it is her duty to remain with her father, am I justified or not in freely consenting to that?’

‘I scarcely understand. Has Marian expressed a wish to devote herself in that way?’

‘Not distinctly. But I suspect that her conscience points to it. I am in serious doubt. On the one hand,’ he explained in a tone of candour, ‘who will not blame me if our engagement terminates in circumstances such as these? On the other—you are aware, by-the-by, that her father objects in the strongest way to this marriage?’

‘No, I didn’t know that.’

‘He will neither see me nor hear of me. Merely because of my connection with Fadge. Think of that poor girl thus situated. And I could so easily put her at rest by renouncing all claim upon her.’

‘I surmise that—that you yourself would also be put at rest by such a decision?’

‘Don’t look at me with that ironical smile,’ he pleaded. ‘What you have said is true. And

really, why should I not be glad of it? I couldn't go about declaring that I was heart-broken, in any event; I must be content for people to judge me according to their disposition, and judgments are pretty sure to be unfavourable. What can I do? In either case I must to a certain extent be in the wrong. To tell the truth, I was wrong from the first.'

There was a slight movement about Amy's lips as these words were uttered: she kept her eyes down, and waited before replying.

'The case is too delicate, I fear, for my advice.'

'Yes, I feel it; and perhaps I oughtn't to have spoken of it at all. Well, I'll go back to my scribbling. I am so very glad to have seen you again.'

'It was good of you to take the trouble to come—whilst you have so much on your mind.'

Again Jasper held the white, soft hand for a superfluous moment.

The next morning it was he who had to wait at the rendezvous; he was pacing the pathway at least ten minutes before the appointed time. When Marian joined him, she was panting from a hurried walk, and this affected Jasper disagreeably; he thought of Amy Reardon's air of repose,

and how impossible it would be for that refined person to fall into such disorder. He observed, too, with more disgust than usual, the signs in Marian's attire of encroaching poverty—her unsatisfactory gloves, her mantle out of fashion. Yet for such feelings he reproached himself, and the reproach made him angry.

They walked together in the same direction as when they met here before. Marian could not mistake the air of restless trouble on her companion's smooth countenance. She had divined that there was some grave reason for this summons, and the panting with which she had approached was half caused by the anxious beats of her heart. Jasper's long silence again was ominous. He began abruptly:

‘You've heard that Harold Biffen has committed suicide?’

‘No!’ she replied, looking shocked.

‘Poisoned himself. You'll find something about it in to-day's *Telegraph*.’

He gave her such details as he had obtained, then added:

‘There are two of my companions fallen in the battle. I ought to think myself a lucky fellow, Marian. What?’

‘You are better fitted to fight your way, Jasper.’

‘More of a brute, you mean.’

‘You know very well I don’t. You have more energy and more intellect.’

‘Well, it remains to be seen how I shall come out when I am weighted with graver cares than I have yet known.’

She looked at him inquiringly, but said nothing.

‘I have made up my mind about our affairs,’ he went on presently. ‘Marian, if ever we are to be married, it must be now.’

The words were so unexpected that they brought a flush to her cheeks and neck.

‘Now?’

‘Yes. Will you marry me, and let us take our chance?’

Her heart throbbed violently.

‘You don’t mean at once, Jasper? You would wait until I know what father’s fate is to be?’

‘Well, now, there’s the point. You feel yourself indispensable to your father at present?’

‘Not indispensable, but—wouldn’t it seem very unkind? I should be so afraid of the

effect upon his health, Jasper. So much depends, we are told, upon his general state of mind and body. It would be dreadful if I were the cause of——'

She paused, and looked up at him touchingly.

'I understand that. But let us face our position. Suppose the operation is successful; your father will certainly not be able to use his eyes much for a long time, if ever; and perhaps he would miss you as much then as now. Suppose he does *not* regain his sight; could you then leave him?'

'Dear, I can't feel it would be my duty to renounce you because my father had become blind. And if he can see pretty well, I don't think I need remain with him.'

'Has one thing occurred to you? Will he consent to receive an allowance from a person whose name is Mrs. Milvain?'

'I can't be sure,' she replied, much troubled.

'And if he obstinately refuses—what then? What is before him?'

Marian's head sank, and she stood still.

'Why have you changed your mind so, Jasper?' she inquired at length.

'Because I have decided that the indefinitely

long engagement would be unjust to you—and to myself. Such engagements are always dangerous; sometimes they deprave the character of the man or woman.'

She listened anxiously and reflected.

'Everything,' he went on, 'would be simple enough but for your domestic difficulties. As I have said, there is the very serious doubt whether your father would accept money from you when you are my wife. Then again, shall we be able to afford such an allowance?'

'I thought you felt sure of that?'

'I'm not very sure of anything, to tell the truth. I am harassed. I can't get on with my work.'

'I am very, very sorry.'

'It isn't your fault, Marian, and —— Well, then, there's only one thing to do. Let us wait, at all events, till your father has undergone the operation. Whichever the result, you say your own position will be the same.'

'Except, Jasper, that if father is helpless, I *must* find means of assuring his support.'

'In other words, if you can't do that as my wife, you must remain Marian Yule.'

After a silence, Marian regarded him steadily.

‘You see only the difficulties in our way,’ she said, in a colder voice. ‘They are many, I know. Do you think them insurmountable?’

‘Upon my word, they almost seem so,’ Jasper exclaimed, distractedly.

‘They were not so great when we spoke of marriage a few years hence.’

‘A few years!’ he echoed, in a cheerless voice. ‘That is just what I have decided is impossible. Marian, you shall have the plain truth. I can trust your faith, but I can’t trust my own. I will marry you now, but—years hence—how can I tell what may happen? I don’t trust myself.’

‘You say you “will” marry me now; that sounds as if you had made up your mind to a sacrifice.’

‘I didn’t mean that. To face difficulties, yes.’

Whilst they spoke, the sky had grown dark with a heavy cloud, and now spots of rain began to fall. Jasper looked about him in annoyance as he felt the moisture, but Marian did not seem aware of it.

‘But shall you face them willingly?’

‘I am not a man to repine and grumble. Put up your umbrella, Marian.’

‘What do I care for a drop of rain,’ she exclaimed with passionate sadness, ‘when all my life is at stake! How am I to understand you? Every word you speak seems intended to dishearten me. Do you no longer love me? Why need you conceal it, if that is the truth? Is that what you mean by saying you distrust yourself? If you do so, there must be reason for it in the present. Could I distrust *myself*? Can I force myself in any manner to believe that I shall ever cease to love you?’

Jasper opened his umbrella.

‘We must see each other again, Marian. We can’t stand and talk in the rain—confound it! Cursed climate, where you can never be sure of a clear sky for five minutes!’

‘I *can’t* go till you have spoken more plainly, Jasper! How am I to live an hour in such uncertainty as this? Do you love me or not? Do you wish me to be your wife, or are you sacrificing yourself?’

‘I do wish it!’ Her emotion had an effect upon him, and his voice trembled. ‘But I can’t answer for myself—no, not for a year. And how are we to marry now, in face of all these——’

‘What can I do? What can I do?’ she

sobbed. 'Oh, if I were but heartless to everyone but to you! If I could give you my money, and leave my father and mother to their fate! Perhaps some could do that. There is no natural law that a child should surrender everything for her parents. You know so much more of the world than I do; can't you advise me? Is there no way of providing for my father?'

'Good God! This is frightful, Marian. I can't stand it. Live as you are doing. Let us wait and see.'

'At the cost of losing you?'

'I will be faithful to you!'

'And your voice says you promise it out of pity.'

He had made a pretence of holding his umbrella over her, but Marian turned away and walked to a little distance, and stood beneath the shelter of a great tree, her face averted from him. Moving to follow, he saw that her frame was shaken with soundless sobbing. When his footsteps came close to her, she again looked at him.

'I know now,' she said, 'how foolish it is when they talk of love being unselfish. In what can there be more selfishness? I feel as

if I could hold you to your promise at any cost, though you have made me understand that you regard our engagement as your great misfortune. I have felt it for weeks—oh, for months! But I couldn't say a word that would seem to invite such misery as this. You don't love me, Jasper, and that's an end of everything. I should be shamed if I married you.'

'Whether I love you or not, I feel as if no sacrifice would be too great that would bring you the happiness you deserve.'

'Deserve!' she repeated bitterly. 'Why do I deserve it? Because I long for it with all my heart and soul? There's no such thing as deserving. Happiness or misery come to us by fate.'

'Is it in my power to make you happy?'

'No; because it isn't in your power to call dead love to life again. I think perhaps you never loved me. Jasper, I could give my right hand if you had said you loved me before—I can't put it into words; it sounds too base, and I don't wish to imply that you behaved basely. But if you had said you loved me before that, I should have it always to remember.'

'You will do me no wrong if you charge me with baseness,' he replied gloomily. 'If I believe

anything, I believe that I did love you. But I knew myself, and I should never have betrayed what I felt, if for once in my life I could have been honourable.'

The rain pattered on the leaves and the grass, and still the sky darkened.

'This is wretchedness to both of us,' Jasper added. 'Let us part now, Marian. Let me see you again.'

'I can't see you again. What can you say to me more than you have said now? I should feel like a beggar coming to you. I must try and keep some little self-respect, if I am to live at all.'

'Then let me help you to think of me with indifference. [Remember me as a man who disregarded priceless love such as yours to go and make himself a proud position among fools and knaves—indeed that's what it comes to. It is you who reject me, and rightly. One who is so much at the mercy of a vulgar ambition as I am, is no fit husband for you. Soon enough you would thoroughly despise me, and though I should know it was merited, my perverse pride would revolt against it. Many a time I have tried to regard life practically as I am able to do theoretically, but it always ends in

hypocrisy. It is men of my kind who succeed ; the conscientious, and those who really have a high ideal, either perish or struggle on in neglect.'

Marian had overcome her excess of emotion.

['There is no need to disparage yourself,' she said. 'What can be simpler than the truth? You loved me, or thought you did, and now you love me no longer. It is a thing that happens every day, either in man or woman, and all that honour demands is the courage to confess the truth.] Why didn't you tell me as soon as you knew that I was burdensome to you?'

'Marian, will you do this?—will you let our engagement last for another six months, but without our meeting during that time?'

'But to what purpose?'

'Then we would see each other again, and both would be able to speak calmly, and we should both know with certainty what course we ought to pursue.'

'That seems to me childish. It is easy for you to contemplate months of postponement. There must be an end now ; I can bear it no longer.'

The rain fell unceasingly, and with it

began to mingle an autumnal mist. Jasper delayed a moment, then asked calmly :

‘Are you going to the Museum?’

‘Yes.’

‘Go home again for this morning, Marian. You can’t work——’

‘I must ; and I have no time to lose. Good-bye!’

She gave him her hand. They looked at each other for an instant, then Marian left the shelter of the tree, opened her umbrella, and walked quickly away. Jasper did not watch her ; he had the face of a man who is suffering a severe humiliation.

A few hours later he told Dora what had come to pass, and without extenuation of his own conduct. His sister said very little, for she recognised genuine suffering in his tones and aspect. But when it was over, she sat down and wrote to Marian.

‘I feel far more disposed to congratulate you than to regret what has happened. Now that there is no necessity for silence, I will tell you something which will help you to see Jasper in his true light. A few weeks ago he actually proposed to a woman for whom he does not pretend to have the slightest affection, but who

is very rich, and who seemed likely to be foolish enough to marry him. Yesterday morning he received her final answer—a refusal. I am not sure that I was right in keeping this a secret from you, but I *might* have done harm by interfering. You will understand (though surely you need no fresh proof) how utterly unworthy he is of you. You cannot, I am sure you cannot, regard it as a misfortune that all is over between you. Dearest Marian, do not cease to think of me as your friend because my brother has disgraced himself. If you can't see me, at least let us write to each other. You are the only friend I have of my own sex, and I could not bear to lose you.'

And much more of the same tenor.

Several days passed before there came a reply. It was written with undisturbed kindness of feeling, but in few words.

'For the present we cannot see each other, but I am very far from wishing that our friendship should come to an end. I must only ask that you will write to me without the least reference to these troubles; tell me always about yourself, and be sure that you cannot tell me too much. I hope you may soon be able to send me the news which was foreshadowed in

our last talk—though “foreshadowed” is a wrong word to use of coming happiness, isn’t it? That paper I sent to Mr. Trenchard is accepted, and I shall be glad to have your criticism when it comes out; don’t spare my style, which needs a great deal of chastening. I have been thinking: couldn’t you use your holiday in Sark for a story? To judge from your letters, you could make an excellent background of word-painting.’

Dora sighed, and shook her little head, and thought of her brother with unspeakable disdain.

CHAPTER XXXVII

REWARDS

WHEN the fitting moment arrived, Alfred Yule underwent an operation for cataract, and it was believed at first that the result would be favourable. This hope had but short duration ; though the utmost prudence was exercised, evil symptoms declared themselves, and in a few months' time all prospect of restoring his vision was at an end. Anxiety, and then the fatal assurance, undermined his health ; with blindness, there fell upon him the debility of premature old age.

The position of the family was desperate. Marian had suffered much all the winter from attacks of nervous disorder, and by no effort of will could she produce enough literary work to supplement adequately the income derived from her fifteen hundred pounds. In the summer of 1885 things were at the worst ; Marian saw no alternative but to draw upon her capital, and so relieve the present at the expense of the future.

She had a mournful warning before her eyes in the case of poor Hinks and his wife, who were now kept from the workhouse only by charity. But at this juncture the rescuer appeared. Mr. Quarmby and certain of his friends were already making a subscription for the Yules' benefit, when one of their number—Mr. Jedwood, the publisher—came forward with a proposal which relieved the minds of all concerned. Mr. Jedwood had a brother who was the director of a public library in a provincial town, and by this means he was enabled to offer Marian Yule a place as assistant in that institution; she would receive seventy-five pounds a year, and thus, adding her own income, would be able to put her parents beyond the reach of want. The family at once removed from London, and the name of Yule was no longer met with in periodical literature.

By an interesting coincidence, it was on the day of this departure that there appeared a number of *The West End* in which the place of honour, that of the week's Celebrity, was occupied by Clement Fadge. A coloured portrait of this illustrious man challenged the admiration of all who had literary tastes, and two columns of panegyric recorded his career for the encourage-

ment of aspiring youth. This article, of course unsigned, came from the pen of Jasper Milvain.

It was only by indirect channels that Jasper learnt how Marian and her parents had been provided for. Dora's correspondence with her friend soon languished ; in the nature of things this could not but happen ; and about the time when Alfred Yule became totally blind the girls ceased to hear anything of each other. An event which came to pass in the spring sorely tempted Dora to write, but out of good feeling she refrained.

For it was then that she at length decided to change her name for that of Whelpdale. Jasper could not quite reconcile himself to this condescension ; in various discourses he pointed out to his sister how much higher she might look if she would only have a little patience.

‘ Whelpdale will never be a man of any note. A good fellow, I admit, but *borné* in all senses. Let me impress upon you, my dear girl, that I have a future before me, and that there is no reason—with your charm of person and mind—why you should not marry brilliantly. Whelpdale can give you a decent home, I admit, but as regards society he will be a drag upon you.’

‘It happens, Jasper, that I have promised to marry him,’ replied Dora, in a significant tone.

‘Well, I regret it, but—you are of course your own mistress. I shall make no unpleasantness. I don’t dislike Whelpdale, and I shall remain on friendly terms with him.’

‘That is very kind of you,’ said his sister suavely.

Whelpdale was frantic with exultation. When the day of the wedding had been settled, he rushed into Jasper’s study and fairly shed tears before he could command his voice.

‘There is no mortal on the surface of the globe one-tenth so happy as I am!’ he gasped. ‘I can’t believe it! Why in the name of sense and justice have I been suffered to attain this blessedness? Think of the days when I all but starved in my Albany Street garret, scarcely better off than poor, dear old Biffen! Why should I have come to this, and Biffen have poisoned himself in despair? He was a thousand times a better and cleverer fellow than I. And poor old Reardon, dead in misery! Could I for a moment compare with him?’

‘My dear fellow,’ said Jasper, calmly, ‘compose yourself and be logical. In the first place, success has nothing whatever to do with moral

deserts ; and then, both Reardon and Biffen were hopelessly unpractical. In such an admirable social order as ours, they were bound to go to the dogs. Let us be sorry for them, but let us recognise *causas rerum*, as Biffen would have said. You have exercised ingenuity and perseverance ; you have your reward.'

'And when I think that I might have married fatally on thirteen or fourteen different occasions. By-the-by, I implore you never to tell Dora those stories about me. I should lose all her respect. Do you remember the girl from Birmingham?' He laughed wildly. 'Heaven be praised that she threw me over ! Eternal gratitude to all and sundry of the girls who have plunged me into wretchedness !'

'I admit that you have run the gauntlet, and that you have had marvellous escapes. But be good enough to leave me alone for the present. I must finish this review by mid-day.'

'Only one word. I don't know how to thank Dora, how to express my infinite sense of her goodness. Will you try to do so for me? You can speak to her with calmness. Will you tell her what I have said to you ?'

'Oh, certainly.—I should recommend a cool-

ing draught of some kind. Look in at a chemist's as you walk on.'

The heavens did not fall before the marriage-day, and the wedded pair betook themselves for a few weeks to the Continent. They had been back again and established in their house at Earl's Court for a month, when one morning about twelve o'clock Jasper dropped in, as though casually. Dora was writing; she had no thought of entirely abandoning literature, and had in hand at present a very pretty tale which would probably appear in *The English Girl*. Her boudoir, in which she sat, could not well have been daintier and more appropriate to the charming characteristics of its mistress. Mrs. Whelpdale affected no literary slovenliness; she was dressed in light colours, and looked so lovely that even Jasper paused on the threshold with a smile of admiration.

'Upon my word,' he exclaimed, 'I am proud of my sisters! What did you think of Maud last night? Wasn't she superb?'

'She certainly did look very well. But I doubt if she's very happy.'

'That is her own look out; I told her plainly enough my opinion of Dolomore. But she was in such a tremendous hurry.'

‘You are detestable, Jasper! Is it inconceivable to you that a man or woman should be disinterested when they marry?’

‘By no means.’

‘Maud didn’t marry for money any more than I did.’

‘You remember the Northern Farmer: “Doän’t thou marry for money, but go where money is.” An admirable piece of advice. Well, Maud made a mistake, let us say. Dolomore is a clown, and now she knows it. Why, if she had waited, she might have married one of the leading men of the day. She is fit to be a duchess, as far as appearance goes; but I was never snobbish. I care very little about titles; what I look to is intellectual distinction.’

‘Combined with financial success.’

‘Why, that is what distinction means.’ He looked round the room with a smile. ‘You are not uncomfortable here, old girl. I wish mother could have lived till now.’

‘I wish it very, very often,’ Dora replied in a moved voice.

‘We haven’t done badly, drawbacks considered. Now you may speak of money as scornfully as you like; but suppose you had

married a man who could only keep you in lodgings? How would life look to you?’

‘Who ever disputed the value of money? But there are things one mustn’t sacrifice to gain it.’

‘I suppose so. Well, I have some news for you, Dora. I am thinking of following your example.’

Dora’s face changed to grave anticipation.

‘And who is it?’

‘Amy Reardon.’

His sister turned away, with a look of intense annoyance.

‘You see, I am disinterested myself,’ he went on. ‘I might find a wife who had wealth and social standing. But I choose Amy deliberately.’

‘An abominable choice!’

‘No; an excellent choice. I have never yet met a woman so well fitted to aid me in my career. She has a trifling sum of money, which will be useful for the next year or two——’

‘What has she done with the rest of it, then?’

‘Oh, the ten thousand is intact, but it can’t be seriously spoken of. It will keep up appearances till I get my editorship and so on. We shall be married early in August, I think.’

I want to ask you if you will go and see her.'

'On no account! I couldn't be civil to her.'

Jasper's brows blackened.

'This is idiotic prejudice, Dora. I think I have some claim upon you; I have shown some kindness——'

'You have, and I am not ungrateful. But I dislike Mrs. Reardon, and I couldn't bring myself to be friendly with her.'

'You don't know her.'

'Too well. You yourself have taught me to know her. Don't compel me to say what I think of her.'

'She is beautiful, and high-minded, and warm-hearted. I don't know a womanly quality that she doesn't possess. You will offend me most seriously if you speak a word against her.'

'Then I will be silent. But you must never ask me to meet her.'

'Never?'

'Never!'

'Then we shall quarrel. I haven't deserved this, Dora. If you refuse to meet my wife on terms of decent friendliness, there's no more

intercourse between your house and mine. You have to choose. Persist in this fatuous obstinacy, and I have done with you !’

‘ So be it !’

‘ That is your final answer ?’

Dora, who was now as angry as he, gave a short affirmative, and Jasper at once left her.

But it was very unlikely that things should rest at this pass. The brother and sister were bound by a strong mutual affection, and Whelpdale was not long in effecting a compromise.

‘ My dear wife,’ he exclaimed, in despair at the threatened calamity, ‘ you are right, a thousand times, but it’s impossible for you to be on ill terms with Jasper. There’s no need for you to see much of Mrs. Reardon——’

‘ I hate her ! She killed her husband ; I am sure of it.’

‘ My darling !’

‘ I mean by her base conduct. She is a cold, cruel, unprincipled creature ! Jasper makes himself more than ever contemptible by marrying her.’

All the same, in less than three weeks Mrs. Whelpdale had called upon Amy, and the call was returned. The two women were perfectly conscious of reciprocal dislike, but they

smothered the feeling beneath conventional suavities. Jasper was not backward in making known his gratitude for Dora's concession, and indeed it became clear to all his intimates that this marriage would be by no means one of mere interest; the man was in love at last, if he had never been before.

Let lapse the ensuing twelve months, and come to an evening at the end of July, 1886. Mr. and Mrs. Milvain are entertaining a small and select party of friends at dinner. Their house in Bayswater is neither large nor internally magnificent, but it will do very well for the temporary sojourn of a young man of letters who has much greater things in confident expectation, who is a good deal talked of, who can gather clever and worthy people at his table, and whose matchless wife would attract men of taste to a very much poorer abode.

Jasper had changed considerably in appearance since that last holiday that he spent in his mother's house at Finden. At present he would have been taken for five-and-thirty, though only in his twenty-ninth year; his hair was noticeably thinning; his moustache had grown heavier; a wrinkle or two showed beneath his eyes; his voice was softer, yet firmer. It goes without

saying that his evening uniform lacked no point of perfection, and somehow it suggested a more elaborate care than that of other men in the room. He laughed frequently, and with a throwing back of the head which seemed to express a spirit of triumph.

Amy looked her years to the full, but her type of beauty, as you know, was independent of youthfulness. That suspicion of masculinity observable in her when she became Reardon's wife impressed one now only as the consummate grace of a perfectly-built woman. You saw that at forty, at fifty, she would be one of the stateliest of dames. When she bent her head towards the person with whom she spoke, it was an act of queenly favour. Her words were uttered with just enough deliberation to give them the value of an opinion; she smiled with a delicious shade of irony; her glance intimated that nothing could be too subtle for her understanding.

The guests numbered six, and no one of them was insignificant. Two of the men were about Jasper's age, and they had already made their mark in literature; the third was a novelist of circulating fame, spirally crescent. The three of the stronger sex were excellent modern types,

with sweet lips attuned to epigram, and good broad brows.

The novelist at one point put an interesting question to Amy.

‘Is it true that Fadge is leaving *The Current*?’

‘It is rumoured, I believe.’

‘Going to one of the quarterlies, they say,’ remarked a lady. ‘He is getting terribly autocratic. Have you heard the delightful story of his telling Mr. Rowland to persevere, as his last work was one of considerable promise?’

Mr. Rowland was a man who had made a merited reputation when Fadge was still on the lower rungs of journalism. Amy smiled and told another anecdote of the great editor. Whilst speaking, she caught her husband’s eye, and perhaps this was the reason why her story, at the close, seemed rather amiably pointless—not a common fault when she narrated.

When the ladies had withdrawn, one of the younger men, in a conversation about a certain magazine, remarked :

‘Thomas always maintains that it was killed by that solemn old stager, Alfred Yule. By the way, he is dead himself, I hear.’

Jasper bent forward.

‘Alfred Yule is dead?’

‘So Jedwood told me this morning. He died in the country somewhere, blind and fallen on evil days, poor old fellow.’

All the guests were ignorant of any tie of kindred between their host and the man spoken of.

‘I believe,’ said the novelist, ‘that he had a clever daughter who used to do all the work he signed. That used to be a current bit of scandal in Fadge’s circle.’

‘Oh, there was much exaggeration in that,’ remarked Jasper, blandly. ‘His daughter assisted him, doubtless, but in quite a legitimate way. One used to see her at the Museum.’

The subject was dropped.

An hour and a half later, when the last stranger had taken his leave, Jasper examined two or three letters which had arrived since dinner-time and were lying on the hall table. With one of them open in his hand, he suddenly sprang up the stairs and leaped, rather than stepped, into the drawing-room. Amy was reading an evening paper.

‘Look at this!’ he cried, holding the letter to her.

It was a communication from the publishers who owned *The Current*; they stated that the

editorship of that review would shortly be resigned by Mr. Fadge, and they inquired whether Milvain would feel disposed to assume the vacant chair.

Amy sprang up and threw her arms about her husband's neck, uttering a cry of delight.

‘So soon ! Oh, this is great ! this is glorious !’

‘Do you think this would have been offered to me but for the spacious life we have led of late ? Never ! Was I right in my calculations, Amy ?’

‘Did I ever doubt it ?’

He returned her embrace ardently, and gazed into her eyes with profound tenderness.

‘Doesn't the future brighten ?’

‘It has been very bright to me, Jasper, since I became your wife.’

‘And I owe my fortune to you, dear girl. Now the way is smooth !’

They placed themselves on a settee, Jasper with an arm about his wife's waist, as if they were newly plighted lovers. When they had talked for a long time, Milvain said in a changed tone :

‘I am told that your uncle is dead.’

He mentioned how the news had reached him.

‘I must make inquiries to-morrow. I suppose there will be a notice in *The Study*, and some of the other papers. I hope somebody will make it an opportunity to have a hit at that ruffian Fadge. By-the-by, it doesn’t much matter now how you speak of Fadge; but I was a trifle anxious when I heard your story at dinner.’

‘Oh, you can afford to be more independent. —What are you thinking about?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Why do you look sad?—Yes, I know, I know. I’ll try to forgive you.’

‘I can’t help thinking at times of the poor girl, Amy. Life will be easier for her now, with only her mother to support. Someone spoke of her this evening, and repeated Fadge’s lie that she used to do all her father’s writing.’

‘She was capable of doing it. I must seem to you rather a poor-brained woman in comparison. Isn’t it true?’

‘My dearest, you are a perfect woman, and poor Marian was only a clever school-girl. Do you know, I never could help imagining that she had ink-stains on her fingers. Heaven forbid that I should say it unkindly! It was touching to me at the time, for I knew how fearfully hard she worked.’

‘She nearly ruined your life; remember that.’

Jasper was silent.

‘You will never confess it, and that is a fault in you.’

‘She loved me, Amy.’

‘Perhaps! as a school-girl loves. But you never loved *her*.’

‘No.’

Amy examined his face as he spoke.

‘Her image is very faint before me,’ Jasper pursued, ‘and soon I shall scarcely be able to recall it. Yes, you are right; she nearly ruined me. And in more senses than one. Poverty and struggle, under such circumstances, would have made me a detestable creature. As it is, I am not such a bad fellow, Amy.’

She laughed, and caressed his cheek.

‘No, I am far from a bad fellow. I feel kindly to everyone who deserves it. I like to be generous, in word and deed. Trust me, there’s many a man who would like to be generous, but is made despicably mean by necessity. What a true sentence that is of Landor’s: “It has been repeated often enough that vice leads to misery; will no man declare that misery leads to vice?” I have much of

the weakness that might become viciousness, but I am now far from the possibility of being vicious.] Of course there are men, like Fadge, who seem only to grow meaner the more prosperous they are ; but these are exceptions. Happiness is the nurse of virtue.'

'And independence the root of happiness.'

'True. "The glorious privilege of being independent"—yes, Burns understood the matter. Go to the piano, dear, and play me something. If I don't mind, I shall fall into Whelpdale's vein, and talk about my "blessedness." Ha ! isn't the world a glorious place ?'

'For rich people.'

'Yes, for rich people. How I pity the poor devils !—Play anything. Better still if you will sing, my nightingale !'

So Amy first played, and then sang, and Jasper lay back in dreamy bliss.

THE END

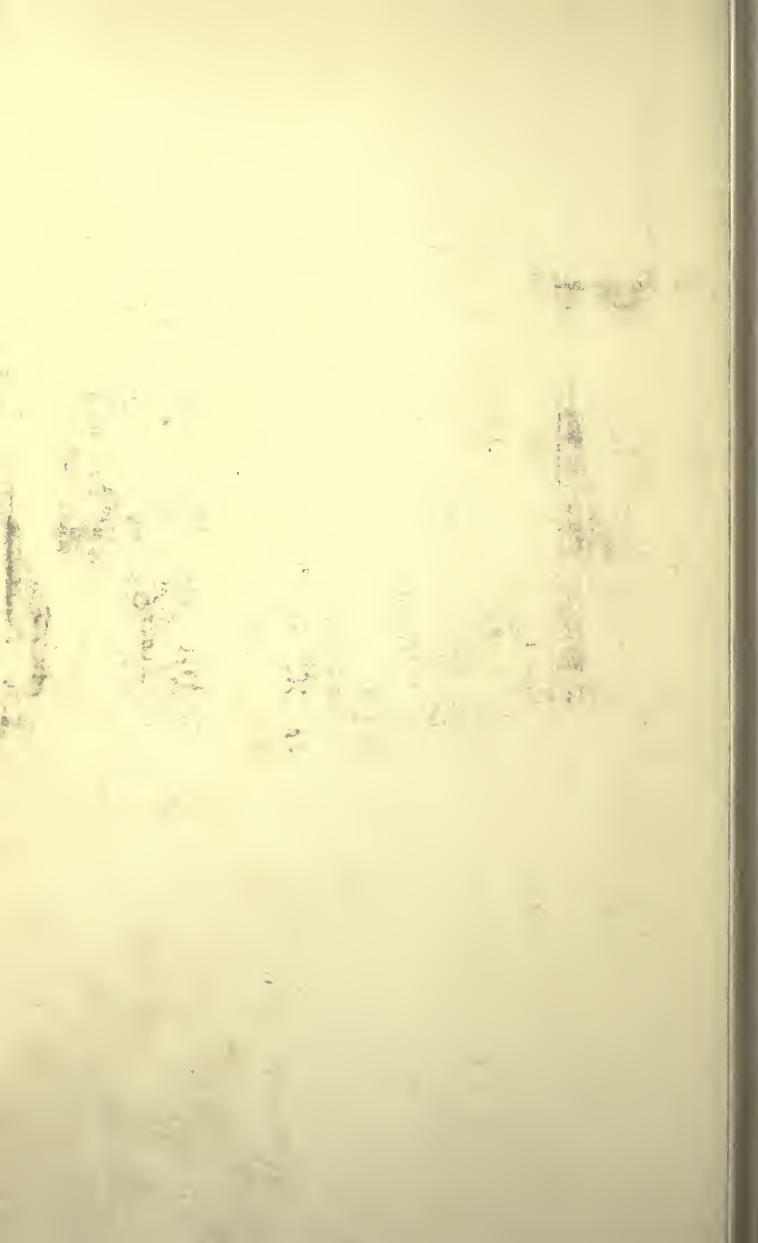
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